

screen



Entomology as anthropology in Bunuel

Exile and longing in Sissako

Warped spaces in Winsor McCay

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cover illustration

Praying mantis drawn by Max Ernst;
programme cover for *L'Âge d'or*
(Luis Buñuel, 1930)

Entomology as anthropology in the films of Luis Buñuel

PAUL BEGIN

Reflecting on *L'Âge d'or*, Henry Miller writes that, 'Buñuel, like an entomologist, has studied what we call love in order to expose beneath the ideology, the mythology, the platitudes and phraseologies the complete and bloody machinery of sex'.¹ The description is certainly apt, and not only as it relates to *L'Âge d'or*, since a number of Buñuel's films are clearly interested in looking beneath the surface of culture to expose the nature of human drives. That said, the key to Miller's insight is the comparison of the Spanish director to an entomologist. It is an analogy that certainly deserves attention, given the fact that an entomological flair has pervaded the cinema of Buñuel since his entry into filmmaking in 1929 with *Un chien andalou*, which combines closeup images of an ant-covered hand with a death's head moth through lap dissolves and cuts.² There also exist memorable scenes of mosquitoes in *Las Hurdes: Land Without Bread* (1933), a bee being saved in *Viridiana* (1961), a shotgunned butterfly in *Diary of a Chambermaid* (1964), a spider in *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974) and a fly in Mathieu's (Fernando Rey) martini in *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), not to mention the myriad other filmic intrusions from other members of the animal kingdom.³ Through a keen use of montage, scenes of ants, scorpions, bees and butterflies are more than simply gratuitous. As Francisco Aranda has noted, 'they always have an additional purpose, as shock images, as methods of transition between sequences, as a reminder to the spectator of the other dramas that played out on the sidelines of the main theme', adding that they are also 'symbols of unbalanced states of mind too'.⁴ Yet, for whatever reason, this entomological aspect of Buñuel's oeuvre has been largely ignored in scholarly criticism. The purpose of this essay is to take

1 *L'Âge d'or/The Golden Age* (Luis Buñuel, 1930); Henry Miller, 'The Golden Age', in Joan Mellen (ed.), *The Worlds of Luis Buñuel* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 166–79, pp. 174–5.

2 *Un chien andalou/An Andalusian Dog* (Luis Buñuel, 1929).

3 Some prominent examples of other animals would be a donkey (*Un chien andalou*, *Las Hurdes*), a cow, toad, snake and a flock of birds (*Las Hurdes*), a cat and a rat (*Diary of a Chambermaid*), a bear and some sheep (*The Exterminating Angel*, 1962), and an ostrich (*The Phantom of Liberty*).

4 Francisco Aranda, *Buñuel: a Critical Biography*, trans. David Robinson (New York, NY: Da Capo, 1976), p. 25.

seriously the director's penchant for the zoological by exploring the way in which it is conjoined with a surrealist vision that translates into a distinct cinematic language. More concretely, this study contends that an examination of *L'Âge d'or* and *Las Hurdes* through Buñuel's unique entomological lens reveals the progressive deployment of a philosophical outlook akin to Roger Caillois's 'comparative biology'. It is an aspect of Buñuel's early films that is part and parcel of his views on 'anti-artistic' film, which, in filmic terms, produces a levelling effect among biological species, ultimately affirming the humanistic aims of surrealism.

There is ample evidence in writings, both biographical and autobiographical, to suggest that the inclusion of these creatures within Buñuel's cinema is not only a tribute to a personal obsession but also a source of critical inquiry and inspiration. It is well known that Buñuel's predilection for insects and animals began as a child.⁵ Conchita, the director's sister, remembers that Buñuel constantly kept pets around the house and that spiders were a sort of family phobia, provoking many 'legendary' family discussions.⁶ While such biographical nuggets may appear trivial, and the inclusion of animals and insects in the director's films merely affected, for Buñuel this fascination was very serious and one that would be developed in later years. After Leonardo Buñuel rejected his son's request to study music, the Spanish auteur compromised, opting to combine his love for insects with a more useful career path studying to become an agricultural engineer in Madrid. While living and studying at the *Residencia de estudiantes* (student hall of residence), Buñuel also worked at the Natural History Museum in Madrid, where he studied under the renowned entomologist Ignacio Bolívar. Under the tutelage of Bolívar, the agricultural engineering student developed a more academic approach to the field of entomology, learning to classify insects and even claiming in his autobiography to be able to 'identify many varieties of insects at a glance and give you their Latin names'.⁷ Speculating on what other possible influence this student-teacher relationship may have produced, it is interesting to note Bolívar's primary expertise was the classification of arthropods such as the praying mantis and the scorpion, exactly those insects that would later interest Buñuel and other surrealists.⁸ Bolívar, however, made no attempt to examine the habits and interactions of insects, instead leaving this task to his students by urging them 'to investigate the relationships that the many species maintain between themselves and with the external environment, in order to inquire into, and offer possible solutions to, the biggest problems posed by nature, which is the ultimate aim of our beautiful science'.⁹ It is a call to which the Spanish director would eventually respond, though in a unique way.

Founded in 1910 by Francisco Giner de los Ríos and influenced by the pedagogical methods of the German philosopher Karl Krause, the *Residencia de estudiantes* was modelled after the residential colleges of Oxford and Cambridge. The first college of its kind in Spain, the

5 Ibid., pp. 19–20. See also Luis Buñuel, *Escritos de Luis Buñuel*, ed. Manuel López Villegas (Madrid: Espuma, 2000), pp. 52–3; José de la Colina and Tomás Pérez Turrent, *Objects of Desire: Conversations with Luis Buñuel*, trans. Paul Lenti (New York, NY: Marsilio, 1992), p. 6.

6 Aranda, *Buñuel: a Critical Biography*, p. 19.

7 Luis Buñuel, *My Last Sigh*, trans. Abigail Israel (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 53.

8 Ignacio Bolívar, *Ortópteros de España y Portugal* (Madrid: Fortanet, 1876), p. 1.

9 Ibid., p. 8. Ironically, in the modern field of applied entomology the study of interactions between insects and their environment is of primary importance. See, for example, J.H. Comstock, *An Introduction to Entomology* (Ithaca, NY: Comstock Publishing, 1950); Van Ellen Little, *General and Applied Entomology* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1972); Richard J. Elzinga, *Fundamentals of Entomology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978). In these sources and elsewhere, the insect world is primarily looked at as a problem that needs to be controlled for the benefit of humankind. Buñuel, as we shall see, will show that, conversely, it is humans who suffer within an absurdly controlled environment while it is the insects who are free.

10 Aranda, *Buñuel: a Critical Biography*, p. 25.

11 Salvador Dalí, *Qui: the Paranoid-Critical Revolution*, ed. Robert Descharnes, trans. Yvonne Shafir (Boston, MA: Exact Change, 1998), p. 82.

12 Haim Finkelstein, 'Dalí and *Un chien andalou*: the nature of collaboration', in Rudolf E. Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film* (New York, NY: Willis Locker and Owens, 1987), pp. 128–41, p. 131.

13 Ibid., p. 136.

14 Ibid., pp. 136–7.

Residencia also served as Spain's foremost intellectual and cultural hub, playing host to some of the country's most renowned figures, including Ramón Menéndez Pidal, Azorín, Miguel de Unamuno, Pío Baroja, José Orgeta y Gasset and Ramón del Valle-Inclán, as well as international figures such as Albert Einstein and Henri Bergson, among others. It was at the *Residencia* that many of Spain's most prominent figures associated with the historical avant garde converged, such as Jorge Guillén, Federico García Lorca, Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel. Within this coterie, Buñuel was not the only student to take an interest in the insect kingdom. Aranda reminds us that 'insects played a great part in Spanish literature at that period, in the work of Lorca, Dámaso Alonso and others, providing our writers with an authentic image – of anxiety, fear, desire, terror'.¹⁰ Lorca's first play, *The Butterfly's Evil Spell* (1920) was in fact about the impossible love between a cockroach and a butterfly. Dalí also figures prominently in this mix, as his early 'surrealist' paintings feature menacing images of grasshoppers.

In *The Liberation of Fingers* (1929), Dalí links the grasshopper with fish, detached fingers and a flying phallus. He introduces this string of associations, which demonstrates his new-found knowledge of Freudian psychoanalysis, as an 'anti-artistic, faithful and objective annotation of the world of facts'.¹¹ As Haim Finkelstein has noted, it is in this period that Dalí began to expound a surrealist theory that discovers

patterns of meaning which synchronize the most diverse phenomena in a coherent system of thought, thus compelling the objective world to obey the reality of the mind. In short, this is an embryonic form of Dalí's future Paranoia-Criticism.¹²

Grasshoppers, along with other 'small things', such as sea urchins, snails, fish and shells, are 'presented in his poetry as "facts" rather than as terms of metaphoric associations', and 'are formally connected to one another by certain operations in the text: Repetitions, statements of identity, statements of sequentiality'.¹³ This 'anti-artistic' enumeration can be readily observed in his surrealist paintings from the period and especially in *Un chien andalou*. Meanwhile, Finkelstein posits, Buñuel's anti-artistic approach would require more 'communicability' through the use of symbols and metaphoric associations with violent and erotic undertones.¹⁴ The observation that Finkelstein makes is helpful for understanding the shift in how insects are used in *Un chien andalou* and then in *L'Âge d'or*. In the case of *L'Âge d'or*, in which Dalí had less input, the insects have a more connotative function. I will return to this later, but for now it is enough to say that insects were in the air, so to speak, and that Buñuel was certainly privy to whatever entomological debates were then current, while at the same time possessing his own ideas about their cinematic function.

Perhaps the most important source when examining the entomological aspects of Buñuel's work is the French entomologist, Jean Henri Fabre. It is documented that Buñuel did not keep much of a library, yet one of the

15 Aranda, *Buñuel: a Critical Biography*, p. 188.

16 Colina and Turrent, *Objects of Desire*, p. 6.

17 For example, Bernard Miall's 1912 translation of Fabre's most renowned collection of essays, *Souvenirs entomologiques*, is titled *Social Life in the Insect World*.

18 Edwin Way Teale, 'Introduction', in Jean Henri Fabre, *The Insect World of J. Henri Fabre* (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1949), pp. ix–xvi, p. xv (my emphasis).

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Maurice Maeterlinck, 'Preface', in Jean Henri Fabre, *The Life of the Spider*, trans. Teixeira de Mattos (New York, NY: Mead, Dodd and Company, 1937), pp. 7–35, p. 7.

22 Ibid., pp. 9–10.

three main sections of his collection of books consisted of several tomes of Fabre's *Souvenirs entomologiques*.¹⁵ The Spanish director has stated that he chose entomology in college 'because all living creatures fascinate me. I began reading Fabre's wonderful books. I'm passionate about insects. You can find all of Shakespeare and de Sade in the lives of insects.'¹⁶ Buñuel's assertion is that one can glean from Fabre's books all of man's most basic instincts and attitudes. Since he lacked formal training, Fabre generally worked outside of the normal scientific bounds and without legitimate scientific equipment. Unlike Bolívar, Fabre spent very little time identifying insect species and instead concentrated on their behaviour within the environment while conducting (often very primitive) experiments in order to better understand their 'mentality'. As the English translations of his works demonstrate, Fabre was especially interested in the 'social life' of insects.¹⁷ Edwin Way Teale observes that

by repeating an experiment over and over again, by the endless inventiveness of his mind, he made up for the lack of adequate equipment. He produced some of the basic studies of the nature of insects. *All students of insect behavior, of comparative psychology, of experimental biology are indebted to Fabre*. His harvest of facts is invaluable still.¹⁸

Furthermore, Fabre 'led in the study of *living entomology* at a time when the science seemed preempted by those whose horizon of interest was limited to the dead insect and the pinned specimen'.¹⁹ Teale, therefore, regards the French entomologist as 'a philosopher who never loses sight of humanity in his writings'.²⁰

It is worth reiterating the French entomologist's lack of formal training. In truth, he was viewed as a failure on several fronts until the last years of his life, when his work received international recognition from aspiring scientists and artists alike. An armchair entomologist himself, Maurice Maeterlinck writes that Fabre is 'one of the most profound and inventive scholars and also one of the purest writers and, I was going to add, one of the finest poets of the century that just passed'.²¹ Maeterlinck's comments are helpful here:

There is something, on the other hand, about the insect that does not seem to belong to the habits, the ethics, the psychology of our globe. One would be inclined to say that the insect comes from another planet, more monstrous, more energetic, more insane, more atrocious, more infernal than our own. . . . There is, no doubt, in this astonishment and lack of understanding a certain instinctive and profound uneasiness inspired by those existences incomparably better-armed, better equipped than our own, by those creatures made up of a sort of compressed energy and activity in whom we suspect our most mysterious adversaries, our ultimate rivals and, perhaps, our successors.²²

²³ Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Life of the Ant*, trans. Bernard Miall (New York, NY: John Day, 1930), p. 31.

²⁴ While the possibility exists that Buñuel had read Maeterlinck's preface to Fabre's work, it cannot be proved. There is likewise no evidence to suggest that Buñuel had read Maeterlinck's own works on insects, which the Belgian began publishing in 1901 with *La vie des abeilles*. It is difficult to imagine that Buñuel would not have at least known of these works. However, Buñuel was much better versed in French than English, indicating that he probably came to know Fabre in the original French rather than through English translations. It is most likely that Buñuel, along with artists such as Maeterlinck, Edmund Rostand, Romain Rolland and later Jean Painlevé, stumbled upon Fabre's work some years after the scientist-author received international recognition in 1910, and discovered in it a break from traditional entomology which all too often was bogged down in detailed identification and timid in the face of more broad-ranging hypotheses. One can only speculate on the timing and manner in which Buñuel discovered Fabre, but what remains clear is that he encountered the latter's books at an early age and before leaving to study in Madrid. It is worth noting that *La vie des abeilles* is also an important intertextual reference in Victor Erice's *Spirit of the Beehive* (1973).

²⁵ Fabre, *The Insect World*, pp. 52–3.

²⁶ Stephen Forcer, "'Trust me, I'm a director': sex, sado-masochism and institutionalization in Luis Buñuel's *Belle de jour* (1967)", *Studies in European Cinema*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2004), pp. 19–29, p. 26.

²⁷ Fabre, *The Insect World*, p. 55 (my emphasis).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Through his own reading of Fabre's essays, Maeterlinck came to see insects as simultaneously both mysteriously savage and linked to humans, a sort of 'Other' that reveals the possibilities or alter ego that are inherent in civilized humans. To this end, Maeterlinck asks the readers of his own entomological books to 'imagine that we are considering the history of a pre-human race, which lived and died some thousands or millions of years before our advent'.²³ Here, Maeterlinck's ideas edge closer to the rationale behind Buñuel's sustained use of insects within his films.²⁴

Given that this essay proposes an intimate link between the ideas of Fabre and the entomological perspective of Buñuel's films, it will be useful to delve more deeply into some of the French scientist's guiding principles. For example, when observing the mating habits of the sphex (or 'Digger Wasp', as Fabre also calls it), the entomologist focuses on the female's surgical skill in incapacitating the male of the species to allow her larvae to live on top of it while using it for nutrition. Through a precise incision, the female sphex puts her mate into a vegetative state, keeping it alive and warm for up to eighteen days. Fabre postulates that the victims of the Digger Wasp do not die from their wounds but from a long process of starvation, and in so doing he reminds the reader: 'Life is continual dissolution, the physiologists tell us; and the Sphex's victims give us the neatest possible demonstration of the fact'.²⁵ This biological act is recalled at the end of *Belle de jour*, in which the sexual exploits of Séverine (Catherine Deneuve) lead to the shooting dead of her lover and the paralysis of her husband. As Stephen Forcer points out, 'this disabling of masculine agency – and the male body in particular – is part of Belle's shift towards an active/sadistic role'.²⁶ More important, however, are the greater implications gleaned from Fabre's observations, such as the fact that this 'surgical' act of the sphex is not a learned activity but one of intuition, thereby calling into question issues of liberty and fate.

Fabre reminds the reader that the precision of the insect is not necessarily a sign of a superior mental capacity but goes hand in hand with irrationality and stupidity:

The Sphex has shown us how infallibly and with what transcendental art she acts when guided by the *unconscious inspiration of her instinct; she is now going to show us how poor she is in resource, how limited in intelligence, how illogical even*, in circumstances outside of her regular routine. By a strange inconsistency, characteristic of the instinctive faculties, profound wisdom is accompanied by an ignorance no less profound.²⁷

He uses as an example the sphex's refusal to abandon its prey (in this case a bee) even when under threat of itself becoming food for the praying mantis. Its gluttony ultimately leads to its demise, as the wasp is 'unable to relinquish the delicious food even amid the terrors of death'.²⁸ Fabre continues to test the intelligence of the wasp by removing its larvae

from its domicile in order to see how the insect reacts. Meanwhile, the insect continues to shore up the habitat in spite of the fact that there is nothing to protect:

Here the work of closing is useless, is supremely absurd; no matter: the insect performs it with the same ardour as though the larva's future depended on it. The insect's various instinctive actions are then fatally linked together.²⁹

It is a scene of complete irrationality in which the insect exhausts itself by performing, without reason, an utterly futile action, one that Buñuel replicates using human subjects in *Las Hurdes* and again, in a more light-hearted way, in *That Obscure Object of Desire*, as Mathieu continually lugs around a heavy burlap sack for no apparent reason.³⁰

The instinct and stupidity of the insect are most acutely observable in the mating practices of the praying mantis:

Love, it is said, is stronger than death! Taken literally, never has an aphorism received a more striking confirmation. . . . The custom of eating the lover after the consummation of the nuptials, of making a meal of the exhausted pigmy, who is henceforth good for nothing, is not so difficult to understand, since insects can hardly be accused of sentimentality; but to devour him during the act surpasses anything that the most morbid mind could imagine. I have seen the thing with my own eyes, and I have not yet recovered from my surprise.³¹

The savagery of the insect causes Fabre to speculate further that the mantis is one of the first species to roam the planet: 'Manners were not gentle in those epochs, which were full of the lust to destroy in order to produce; and the Mantis, a feeble memory of those ancient ghosts, might well preserve the customs of an earlier age'.³² In considering the ideas put forth thus far – the insect's status as avatar, the 'unconscious inspiration of her instinct', a mortal 'consummation of the nuptials', the sheer lack of sentimentality and of morals – it is easy to see why insects such as the praying mantis and the bee would appeal to a surrealist who hoped to immolate social conventions and sexual mores.

So prevalent were these associations that another surrealist, Roger Caillois, theorized them. In his 1934 article, 'The praying mantis: from biology to psychoanalysis', Caillois writes: 'certain objects and images are endowed with a comparatively high degree of lyrical force because their form or content is especially significant'.³³ Chief among these objects is the praying mantis, which has the 'objective capacity to act directly on the emotions to an exceptional degree; this is very useful in helping us to understand how imaginative syntheses can be transmitted in a lyrical way'.³⁴ Caillois researches the possible reasons why the praying mantis has such a direct effect on humans. He wades through a plethora of findings from various times and places, noting that the mantis has affected many people in different ways and carried with it many different associations. In one instance the mantises were referred to as the

29 Ibid., p. 61.

30 Buñuel inverts this act in *The Phantom of Liberty*, as the parents and police detective go about looking for a girl who is right in front of them.

31 J. Henri Fabre, *Social Life in the Insect World*, trans. Bernard Miall (New York, NY: Century, 1914), p. 84.

32 Ibid., p. 85.

33 Roger Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism*, ed. and trans. Claudine Frank (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 69.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., p. 74.

‘epaphrodites, meaning literally “who are an invitation to love”’, while elsewhere the insect is referred to as the ‘empusa’, a kind of fungus that parasitically attaches itself to other insects but which also, in antiquity, refers to fantastic imaginings.³⁵ Yet one of the main reasons that the praying mantis has such a powerful effect on the human species is its anthropomorphic character. Apropos of the longstanding mythology of the mantis:

36 Ibid., p. 81.

We must also take into account half-physiological, half-psychological factors such as man’s inclination to be interested in, or even to identify with, anything whose external configuration suggests his own body – for example, the praying mantis or the bat. We should pay even more attention to certain basic emotional reactions and clusters that sometimes exist only as potentialities in human beings, but that correspond to phenomena explicitly and are commonly observed throughout the rest of nature.³⁶

37 Ibid.

Ultimately, what Caillois suggests is the practice of what he calls ‘comparative biology’ in order to understand the psychology of humans – that is, ‘the existence of such emotional constellations as the major complexes (Oedipus complex, castration anxiety, etc.)’.³⁷ He writes that through comparative biology, ‘we may achieve a closer approximation of the larger context within which these complexes should be viewed’.³⁸

38 Ibid.

According to Caillois, there are two senses in which the insect is able to affect humans. The first is by creating a ‘shock effect’ which preys on the subject’s subconscious fears of the unknown. The second, which he calls comparative biology, is inherently more pedagogical, though sometimes shocking, insofar as it generates information through comparisons between two biological realms that are often bracketed off, namely the human and the zoological. While an insect such as the praying mantis may present an unmediated scare, it is also frightening (and informative) because its habits are known and feared. Its anthropomorphic qualities, such as its ‘spectral’ stance (made famous by Dalí), are paralyzing, stimulating an attitude of ambivalence in which the subject is compelled to observe its human-like characteristics, yet repulsed by its vicious machinations. Ironically, it is the very savagery of the praying mantis, and the scorpion for that matter, that compelled surrealists such as Buñuel and Caillois to adopt it as a model of ideal human activity, completely free from any social strictures and in touch with its most essential instincts. In this sense, one can observe a fundamental difference between, on the one hand, Fabre and Maeterlinck and, on the other, Buñuel and Caillois. The former ask their readers to consider human activity as a way of better understanding insects and their behaviour. Surrealists such as Caillois and Buñuel do just the opposite, finding in the insect world an *a priori* model of behaviour that is bereft of arbitrary morals. The following paragraphs examine how Buñuel, through montage, uses such insects and other animals to reinforce and even expose the fundamental nature of human behaviour.

Before I consider further the two films in question, *L'Âge d'or* and *Las Hurdes*, a caveat must be made. This essay has deliberately omitted a discussion of *Un chien andalou*, even though it may appear ripe for an 'entomological' interpretation. However, as mentioned earlier, there exist fundamental differences between the entomological references in *Un chien andalou* and *L'Âge d'or*, differences which parallel the two senses in which insects affect the subject as mentioned above. For example, in *Un chien andalou* the moth and the ants have no 'comparative' value *per se*. The ants on the hand constitute a visual/verbal pun, playing on the word *hormigas* (ants) and *hormigueo*, which means pins-and-needles in Spanish. Also the death's head moth functions as an emblem of death, in the long *memento mori* tradition, even if the skull is only our *gestalt* of a marking on the moth's back. Yet these images are incorporated into the film in a seemingly illogical manner so as to generate an immediate affect, to shock. The moth sequence may contain some narrative logic, insofar as it can be linked to the idea of *amour fou*. Nevertheless, the use of insects in *L'Âge d'or* is considerably more 'informative', as the viewer observes the insects within their natural habitat, a sequence that is legible at the narrative level. This is not to say that some of the same ideas are not at play in *L'Âge d'or* and beyond; however, there is a subtle shift that reflects the difference between the extreme 'anti-artistic' views of Dalí's and Buñuel's growing understanding of the need for narrative in film.³⁹

Indeed, through a perceptive use of montage, which Buñuel calls 'film's golden key', *L'Âge d'or* provides a very focused attempt at comparative biology.⁴⁰ There can be no doubt that Buñuel had Fabre in mind when editing his second film. Miller, among others, alludes to the fact that it is indeed a scathing attack on bourgeois constraints in favour of *amour fou*, an attack that is framed by two important sequences, namely documentary footage of scorpions and an unmistakable allusion to a final orgy led by the Duke of Blangy, who greatly resembles Christ. Buñuel uses stock footage and adds pseudo-scientific commentary on the behaviour of scorpions, but it is interesting to note that the information offered is lifted, almost directly at times, from Fabre's *The Life of the Scorpion*. For example, the film's commentary reads: 'Its tail comprises five prismatic joints', while Fabre writes that, 'the tail, which is really the animal's abdomen, is a series of five prismatic segments'.⁴¹ The director of *L'Âge d'or* also introduces a closeup of the insect's pincers with the following curious phrase: 'The pincers, recalling those of the larger crayfish, are instruments of aggression and information', which clearly echoes the phrase employed by Fabre: 'The pincers, those buccal hands recalling the claws of the Crayfish, are organs of battle and information'.⁴² The prologue to *L'Âge d'or*, which Allen Weiss has rightly called 'a symbolic protasis in which is prefigured a Surrealist "theory" of culture where the established values of sublimation are consistently challenged by the disruptive effects of perversion', is then directly linked to the observations of Fabre.⁴³

39 Henry Miller makes a similar observation: 'I am not aware of the part which Dalí played in the creation of this great film [*L'Âge d'or*], and yet I cannot refrain from thinking of it as the peculiar product of his collaborator, the man who directed the film: Luis Buñuel'. Miller, 'The Golden Age', p. 172. See also Aranda, *Buñuel: a Critical Biography*, p. 69.

40 Buñuel, *Escritos*, p. 183.

41 J. Henri Fabre, *The Life of the Scorpion*, trans. Alexander Teixeira de Mattos and Bernard Miall (New York, NY: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1923), p. 8.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

43 Allen S. Weiss, 'Between the sign of the scorpion and the sign of the cross: *L'Âge d'or*', in Rudolf E. Kuenzli (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 159–75, p. 159.

Yet the importance of Fabre's work does not end with the prologue. In *The Life of the Scorpion*, following comments on the tail and claws, the entomologist moves on to describe the scorpion's eyes:

Extremely short-sighted and squinting outrageously, how does the Scorpion manage to steer himself? Like a blind man, he gropes his way: he guides himself with his hands, that is to say, his pincers, which he carries outstretched, with the fingers open, to sound the space before him. Watch two Scorpions wandering in the open air in my rearing-cages. A meeting would be disagreeable, sometimes even dangerous for them.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Fabre, *The Life of the Scorpion*, p. 13.

This commentary does not figure directly in the film. This is because the director, rather than adding more documentary footage, cuts to a group of 'bandits'. 'Some hours later', as the caption reads, a transition is made to a rugged exterior setting and the film follows one bandit to a cavernous hideout where he meets up with the rest of the group. Here, like the scorpions described by Fabre, the inhabitants live in obscurity, demonstrating a bellicose attitude towards each other as they 'grobe' around in the cave. Once they finally leave to attack the 'Mallorcans', *L'Âge d'or*'s presentation of (often repressed) instinctual desire goes into full swing. The point is that the director moves from an objective sequence about scorpions to the realm of humanity while maintaining what Weiss has called the 'anal-sadistic determinations' found in the insects and described by Fabre.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Weiss, 'Between the sign of the scorpion', p. 159.

As Román Gubern points out, it is well-known that Buñuel and Dalí both associated sex with death and a sense of guilt stemming from their religious inculcation.⁴⁶ Dalí in particular flaunted his paranoia and aversion towards the female genitalia and sex in general, which, as mentioned above, figures into the (anti)plot of *Un chien andalou*, which Dalí described as an 'admirable sadistic realization which appealed to people's latent masochism'.⁴⁷ But in *L'Âge d'or* the conflation of sex, death and incorporation becomes more pronounced.

⁴⁶ Román Gubern, *Proyector de luna* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 1999), p. 412.

⁴⁷ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 413. Also of interest is the following: 'As a youth living in Madrid, Dalí confessed, "I lived in complete terror of the act of making love", to which he ascribed characteristics of bestiality, violence and extreme ferocity. ... "I have always thought that the destiny of the male mantis illustrated my own case in the face of love".'
Ibid., p. 412.

In *L'Âge d'or*, Buñuel and Dalí expanded and inverted the sexual cannibalism of the Praying Mantis; Gaston Modot puts the fingers of Lya Lys in his mouth and bites them, bringing him great pleasure. But in spite of their mutual pleasure, the destiny of the two protagonist lovers is likewise contrarian and they are denied a happy ending.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 413. The original programme for *L'Âge d'or* featured on the cover a drawing of the praying mantis by Max Ernst.

⁴⁹ See Dawn Ades, *Dalí* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), pp. 140–9 in particular.

The film that begins with the savage scorpions continues to build on the aforementioned themes, culminating in the final, murderous orgy. These associations made between insects such as the praying mantis and the scorpion, the surrealist appropriation of *amour fou*, and the paranoiac-critical analysis of Dalí are by now well documented.⁴⁹ Here, though, we can pause and appreciate the way in which Buñuel continues, in filmic terms, to link scorpions with men. By virtue of beginning the film with this 'fact' (that is, the scorpion sequence), he alters the level of the film from artistic to anti-artistic, in which everything in life is viewed with the

same expression as that of Buster Keaton – ‘like that of a bottle’ – or as if it were a single-celled organism under a microscope.⁵⁰

L'Âge d'or has here been treated only in brief, on the assumption that film scholars are aware of its core elements. It is crucial, however, to highlight the impact of Fabre on Buñuel's own entomological vision as it is rendered cinematographically, not only because it helps to produce a more complete picture of *L'Âge d'or*, but also because it aids in elucidating the perplexing documentary that is *Las Hurdes*. The Spanish director's documentary film has garnered a great deal of critical attention in recent years, much of it centring on two things: first, the ambiguous, even contradictory nature of the film, that Ado Kyrrou has called its ‘yes, but’ structure; and second, the political circumstances in Spain that preceded the production of the documentary and the subsequent fallout, also taking into account the emerging fields of anthropology and ethnography.⁵¹ Critics such as Tom Conley, Mercé Ibarz, James Lastra and Jordana Mendelson have all at least mentioned the film's relationship to anthropology and, especially, its subfield ethnography.⁵² Mendelson and Ibarz are especially helpful in linking *Las Hurdes* to the work of Georges Bataille and the pseudo-ethnographic magazine *Documents*. In spite of their research, however, questions remain about shot selection and, especially, organization. Why, for example, does the director effectively interrupt the documentary with another brief documentary on mosquitoes? What must be added to this discussion on ethnography is Buñuel's notion of comparative biology and its cinematic manifestation. In the pages that follow I explore how Buñuel makes an original link between documentary and surrealism by manipulating the scientifically ‘objective’ format of the documentary to go beyond an ethnographic depiction of exotic cultures by presenting the spectator with a comparison of species that is designed to reveal the latent desires and futile behaviour that can be found in both man and animal.

As Mendelson points out, between the filming of *L'Âge d'or* and *Las Hurdes*, a new facet of surrealism was emerging which attempted to integrate scientific exploration with humanism. Ethnography in particular – the scientific description of different cultures characterized by its direct and (hopefully) unbiased methods of observation and reporting – was quickly taking root among Paris's young intelligentsia. According to James Clifford, much of this interest was generated by a group of university scholars who established the Paris Institut d'Ethnologie, namely Paul Rivet, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Marcel Mauss.⁵³ This new line of inquiry would appeal to many surrealists, in particular Michel Leiris, Philippe Soupault and especially Bataille, who acquired from Mauss the catchphrase ‘taboos are made to be violated’.⁵⁴ According to Clifford, ethnography ‘shares with surrealism an abandonment of the distinction between high and low culture’, which ‘provided both a fund of non-Western alternatives and a prevailing attitude of ironic participant-observation among the hierarchies and meanings of collective life’.⁵⁵ Ethnography, as a science of man, appealed to surrealists such as Leiris and Bataille because it exploded

51 Ado Kyrrou, *Luis Buñuel: an Introduction*, trans. Adrienne Foulke (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 43.

52 Tom Conley, ‘Documentary surrealism: on *Land without Bread*’, in Rudolf E. Kuenzi (ed.), *Dada and Surrealist Film* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 176–98; Mercé Ibarz, *Buñuel documental: Tierra sin pan y su tiempo* (Zaragoza: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 1999); James F. Lastra, ‘Why is this absurd picture here? Ethnology/equivocation/Buñuel’, *October*, no. 89 (1999), pp. 51–68; Jordana Mendelson, ‘Contested territory: the politics of geography in Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes: Tierra sin pan*’, *Locus Amoenus*, no. 2 (1996), pp. 230–42.

53 James Clifford, ‘On ethnographic surrealism’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 23, no. 4 (1981), pp. 539–64, p. 543.

54 *Ibid.*, p. 545.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 549.

56 Ibid., p. 551.

cultural hierarchies while undoing arbitrary semiotics. Subsequently, what the surrealists did under the veil of human science (that is, ethnography) was to amass all sorts of objective facts (artefacts, specimens, photos, and so on) into one place, such as a magazine or museum space, thus creating an ethnographic collage in the name of knowing man as a collective being. These collages would constitute a sort of hybrid between humanism and scientific inquiry, with the ability to level cultures and dissolve hierarchies of man: 'Once, in principle, everything in culture is deemed worthy of collection and relationships', then 'fundamental issues of classification and value are raised'.⁵⁶

Linked to this 'scientific' approach to humanism is the question of travel and subsequent notions of exoticism. Ethnographic research has its roots in colonial expansion and travel writing; however, Michael Richardson has observed that, in general, the surrealists were not in favour of travel, citing André Breton, René Magritte, Vincente Bounoure, Paul Eluard and Buñuel, a point to which I shall return. That said, Richardson goes on to mention several important figures who combine travelling and surrealism, namely Michel Leiris, Antonin Artaud and Octavio Paz. Each of these figures had their own idea of what travelling meant with regard to observation and what Richardson calls 'the science of man'; nevertheless, there exists a common thread in their approaches which speaks to the entire enterprise mentioned above and in particular to *Las Hurdes*. Richardson summarizes:

The key surrealist image for the idea of travel is the phrase, 'As he crossed the bridge the phantoms came to meet him', something that comes from a film in which the lead character crosses a bridge into a dark forest. In the film the scene that follows the crossing of the bridge is printed in negative, suggesting the dialectical with otherness in terms of a turning upside down of values. It is perhaps in the surrealist attitude towards the cinema that we can gain another perspective onto ethnography through surrealism.⁵⁷

57 Richardson, 'Travel, surrealism and the science of mankind', p. 88.

What Richardson highlights is a paradox – that through an encounter with the exotic one discovers oneself. It is, therefore, remarkably strange that Richardson never once mentions *Las Hurdes*, since the film predates even the travelogues of Leiris.⁵⁸ It is true that Buñuel claimed to have an aversion to travel and that his excursion to *Las Hurdes* could be considered 'domestic' and therefore not qualify; however, the argument could be made that *Las Hurdes* brings the Spanish public face to face with itself on a number of levels, as Ibarz and Mendelson have already argued. *Las Hurdes*, after all, does suggest a subversion of values such as Richardson postulates, yet this is not done by virtue of travel alone. It is instead carried out through a careful selection, presentation and ordering of material that I am calling entomological anthropology.

58 See Michel Leiris. *L'Afrique fantôme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1934).

The word anthropology was employed in the above sentence deliberately. The criticism of *Las Hurdes* tends to gloss over the distinction between the general field of study (anthropology) and one of

59 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic, 1973), p. 5.

its branches (ethnography), which is unfortunate, since some clarification will help to bring into sharp focus Buñuel's documentary and other films as well. There is obviously not sufficient space here for a full-length discussion of the differences between the two fields, but some general lines may be drawn. Anthropology is the blanket concept, defined as the study of human beings in their totality. With regard to academic disciplines, it is often broken into two parts, physical (biological) anthropology and social anthropology, or what is more commonly referred to as 'cultural anthropology'. Ethnography belongs to the latter, and, though it may take into account factors such as geography, climate and animal species, is ostensibly more interested in the customs, belief systems, politics, and so on, of any given culture. It is furthermore distinguished by its methodology, which involves first-hand observation of any given culture. Ethnography is, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz: travelling, collecting data, organizing said data and offering interpretations.⁵⁹ As mentioned earlier, ethnography seeks to understand the strictly cultural aspects of a community or civilization as a model for observation and interpretation that is in search of meaning (or meanings). Meanwhile, scientific, or biological anthropology is interested in questions of genetic inheritance, human adaptability, and so on. It often seeks to uncover discrepancies and similarities between human groups and other biological species. As totally relevant sciences, both endeavour to reveal the totality of human behaviour, but at different levels. The question is to what extent Buñuel is practising cultural anthropology and to what extent he is looking at humans in comparison to other species? He is, of course, doing both, as these fields themselves are often enmeshed; however, what must be emphasized at this juncture is the importance he places on biological issues, thereby locating *Las Hurdes* under the more encompassing umbrella of anthropology.

Las Hurdes certainly partakes in the ethnographic tradition insofar as the director travels to a given location and 'documents' its inhabitants. Along with other surrealist ethnographies, it likewise strikes a clean blow to certain social institutions through comparative praxis. Yet what makes Buñuel's ethnographic adventure different from other ethnographic documentaries and travelogues (apart from its 'yes, but' structure) is precisely the way in which it conflates general biology with what is strictly human. He largely avoids displaying typical ethnographic data, such as art and rituals, opting instead for more biological data (the origins of the inhabitants, plant and animal life and geography). As Mendelson shows, *Las Hurdes* would eventually become politicized, mainly as an important piece of Republican propaganda; however, at its conception it was also meant to be an experiment in anthropology in the more biological sense, one with an entomological twist.

Several factors contributed to Buñuel's decision to document the Hurdanos in the way he did. *Las Hurdes* had already been in the news for some time, due to expeditions by Miguel de Unamuno (1913), Gregorio Marañón along with Alfonso XIII (1922), and Maurice Legendre.⁶⁰

60 See Ibarz, *Buñuel documental*, and Dolores Moreno (ed.), *Viaje a Las Hurdes: El manuscrito inédito de Gregorio Marañón y las fotografías de la visita de Alfonso XIII* (Madrid: El País and Aguilar, 1993). The latter work contains, along with the account by Gregorio Marañón of his trip with Alfonso XIII, a compilation of articles by others about the region, including Miguel de Unamuno.

⁶¹ Buñuel states that he initially thought of filming a documentary in Las Hurdes because of Legendre: 'It came about because I had read the doctoral thesis of Legendre, director of the French Institute of Madrid. An admirable book, I still have it in my library. For twenty years Legendre spent every summer in Las Hurdes to conduct a complete study of the region: botanical, zoological, climatological, social, etc. A marvel! Later, I read some articles about the place that the Madrid magazine *Estampa* published when the king visited there.' Colina and Turmet, *Objects of Desire*, p. 31.

⁶² Ibarz, *Buñuel Documental*, p. 41.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Buñuel, *Escritos*, p. 62.

⁶⁵ Ibarz, *Buñuel Documental*, p. 76. It was for precisely this reason that, after viewing *Las Hurdes*, Dr Marañón complained 'that Buñuel had ignored the beautiful architecture and the artistic traditions of the village of La Alberca. Evidently the two men thought on different lines.' Quoted in Aranda, *Buñuel: a Critical Biography*, p. 94.

⁶⁶ Mendelson, 'Contested territory', p. 238. Mendelson also gives attention to Bataille's article 'The big toe', which appeared in *Documents* with photographs by Jacques-André Boiffard, as one of the key texts in *Las Hurdes*. She notes that Boiffard worked with Lotar from 1929 to 1932 at Studios Unis on the rue Froidevaux, frequently publishing photographs to accompany articles written by Bataille. Subsequently, Lotar emulates some of the photographs and even photographic techniques employed by Boiffard. Mendelson, 'Contested territory', pp. 238–40.

Buñuel was privy to the growing debate over Las Hurdes and was particularly taken with Legendre's oft-mentioned doctoral dissertation, *Las Jurdes, étude de géographie humaine*, published in 1927, a copy of which Buñuel kept in his personal library throughout his lifetime.⁶¹ The title of that thesis alone offers a clue as to why Buñuel would be interested in the region, given the current discussion of 'human science' among the surrealists. It is, likewise, no surprise that Ibarz finds a number of similarities between the documentary film and the work of Legendre.⁶² Several of these similarities are worth mentioning, such as the emphasis on the geographic makeup of the region, the agricultural practices of the inhabitants, the lack of ceremonies, folklore and even personal expression, especially in Las Hurdes Altas, that is, the sheer absence of cultural expression.⁶³ Buñuel would later remember that he never heard a single song while he was there.⁶⁴ Why would he choose to film in Las Hurdes and concentrate on Las Hurdes Altas? Precisely because he hoped to capture, to use Ibarz's words, something of 'a socially base character, Las Hurdes as the social representation of a primitive state of humanity'.⁶⁵

Buñuel, who already retained certain notions about European culture and its morals – mainly that they are arbitrary – had no interest in depicting the Hurdano society as such, at least not as a society with which viewers could directly identify. The director was after something wholly anti-artistic and removed from, if not antagonistic to, the realm of culture. Instead, *Las Hurdes* provides a scientific account in which the people are reduced to primitive biological specimens – man before he was corrupted by culture, avatars of another time. Like Fabre with his insects, Buñuel inquires into how the Hurdanos respond to their environment with complete disregard for what many, even those in the nearby La Alberca, consider to be the normal social rules governing everyday life. In fact, Buñuel takes this investigation into human geography a step further by examining the Hurdanos as if they were any other biological species, as if, for instance, they were insects, which explains why Buñuel hired Eli Lotar as his cameraman.

Jordana Mendelson writes that Lotar is important to *Las Hurdes* insofar as he was a regular contributor to Bataille's pseudo-ethnographic magazine *Documents*, and also photographer for Bataille's dictionary entry on abattoirs: 'Lotar's still images showing the mechanisms of slaughter and the compulsive organization of limbs, find reverberations in his camerawork for *Las Hurdes*'.⁶⁶ This, according to Mendelson, would give Lotar the expertise needed for 'shooting' scenes of a goat falling off a cliff. While these are certainly valid considerations, there is another factor which is more likely, given the scope of *Las Hurdes*: Lotar had previously worked with another surrealist director, Jean Painlevé, from 1929 to 1930, the time in which Buñuel was filming *L'Âge d'or* and thinking along the lines of documentary film.

Painlevé is the director who began in the 1920s to film underwater documentaries about sea horses, crustaceans and sea urchins, often

67 Jim Knox, 'Sounding the depths: Jean Painlevé's sunken cinema', *Senses of Cinema*, no. 25 (March/April 2003). URL: <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/03/25/painleve.html> [accessed 19 September 2007]. Knox writes that 'these soundtracks were a means of enhancing the popular appeal of films expressly intended for a wider audience: but this music also functions as an "irrational enlargement" of aquatic gestures framed in the camera lens'. According to Knox, 'specialist audiences were scandalized by the soundtracks to Painlevé's films – presumably, to Painlevé's own considerable delight. *The Vampire* – Painlevé's exploration of the vampire as a biological archetype and his cheerfully morbid allegory for Nazism – is enlivened by Duke Ellington's "Black and tan fantasy" and "Echoes of the jungle". *Las Hurdes* has similarly received attention for its similarly discordant soundtrack. Mercé Ibarz, 'A serious experiment: *Land Without Bread*, 1933', in Peter Evans (ed.), *Luis Buñuel: New Readings* (London: British Film Institute, 2004), pp. 27–42.

68 The sea urchin motif is important for understanding the relationship between Dalí and Buñuel and is also linked to their obsession with Saint Sebastian. In 1929 Dalí had an argument with his father, prompting him to shave his head. Buñuel then took a photo of Dalí in a pose that recalls Saint Sebastian (as well as William Tell, with the sea urchin replacing the apple), as he is depicted in religious iconography, with a sea urchin atop his head. The sea urchin, in this case, refers back to Dalí's father – it was his favorite food. Coincidentally, Buñuel filmed Dalí's father eating these creatures with bread and wine, thereby creating what may be called his first documentary in 1930. I want to thank Miquel Visa for providing information on *Eating Sea Urchins*. For an illuminating account of *Eating Sea Urchins*, see Jordana Mendelson, *Documenting Spain: Artists,*

setting them to inappropriate music.⁶⁷ Jim Knox's depiction of Painlevé's work is helpful the context of this essay:

Painlevé gives a fabulist's account of the enchanted marginalia of animal life and behavior. . . . There's an undeniable pedagogical function, but it's by way of an enthusiast sharing his passions – for alien, largely underwater fauna – with a neophyte audience. . . . As children, the works of the naïve French naturalist, Jean Henri Fabre, had alerted future Surrealists like Painlevé and Buñuel to the ubiquitous eroticism and atrocity of their immediate microcosmic environment.

Perhaps Buñuel's interest in Painlevé stemmed from his and Dalí's fascination with sea urchins, which appear in *Un chien andalou* and are the subject of what can be considered Buñuel's first documentary – *Eating Sea Urchins* – which is a short film of Dalí's father eating his favourite food on the patio in Cadaqués.⁶⁸ More important is the fact that, like Fabre's works, 'Painlevé's films could be said to provide an elliptical anthropomorphism'.⁶⁹ Although Knox finds this 'comparative biology' facile, it was critical to the agenda of the surrealists and Buñuel in particular, who hoped that, through the lens of nature, humans could better understand themselves on a higher psychological level. In this light, Mendelson correctly views *Eating Sea Urchins* as a precursor to *Las Hurdes* and an important experiment in various documentary registers, which presents Dalí's father as 'an anthropological subject whose every move is being examined and registered by the camera'.⁷⁰

Buñuel was well aware of Painlevé's films and had been trying to have them screened at the *Cine club* at the *Residencia*. He was successful on 28 May 1930, when in a session entitled 'Biology and the avant garde' (with a presentation by Gregorio Marañón) the following films by Painlevé were screened: *Les Oursins/Sea Urchin* (1927), *Le Hys* (1927), *Bernard l'hermite/Bernard the Hermit Crab* (1927) and *Le Serum du Docteur Normet/The Normet Serum: Experimental Treatment of a Hemorrhage in a Dog* (1930). Upon seeing the scientific work of Lotar in these films, the director of *Las Hurdes* was interested in acquiring his experience and expertise for his next project, since, as Ibarz notes, 'Lotar was able to provide *Land Without Bread* with the vision of scientific cinema that the film included upon incorporating a short documentary on anopheles mosquitoes that cause malaria'.⁷¹ In short, Lotar's prowess behind the camera would be critical to Buñuel's foray into comparative biology.

Apart from his choice of shots and cameraman, Buñuel's conflation of ethnography, anthropology and comparative biology is most evident at the level of montage. The glaring disconnect between the film's elements is what has generated the bulk of critical dialogue, with some finding it to be deliberately open-ended if not ambivalent (Conley, Lastra, Sobchack), while others judge its contradictions to be totally revolutionary, a telling product of the political and cultural clashes that were taking place in Spain at the time (Ibarz, Mendelson).⁷² However, what is most critical to

Exhibition Culture, and the Modern Nation, 1929–1939 (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), pp. 52–63.

69 Knox, 'Sounding the depths'.

70 Mendelson, *Documenting Spain*, p. 60.

71 Ibarz, *Buñuel Documental*, p. 71.

72 See Conley, 'Documentary surrealism', pp. 176–98; Vivian Sobchack, 'Synthetic vision: the dialectical imperative of Luis Buñuel's *Las Hurdes*', in Barry Keith Grant and Jeannette Sloniowski (eds), *Documenting the Documentary: Close Readings of Documentary Film and Video* (Detroit, IL: Wayne State University Press, 1998), pp. 70–82.

73 One must also keep in mind the disconnect between what is shown and what is heard. For example, a pro-Republican epilogue was added in 1936, while Buñuel backdated the film to 1932. A new soundtrack was also created in 1961 on the eve of Buñuel's return to Spain in order to film *Viridiana*. This, however, has changed over the years and is, in my estimation, secondary to the visual material since what remains unchanged, apart from the elimination of the map of other European 'Hurdes' and the marriage scene in La Alberca from some copies, is the film's montage. For a concise version of the changes made to *Las Hurdes*, see Ibarz, 'A serious experiment'.

74 I agree with Ibarz when she writes that *Las Hurdes* 'is probably the film where he exercised greatest control . . . there is nothing really gratuitous in *Land Without Bread*'. Ibid., p. 39.

75 Ibarz, *Buñuel Documental*, p. 20.

76 Lastra, 'Why is this absurd picture here?', p. 64.

all of these considerations is the compelling and problematic visual structure of *Las Hurdes*.⁷³ The realization of this subversive project is, more than anything, a matter of assembling a team (including Lotar), staging and shooting the scenes, and then organizing the material, over which Buñuel exerted complete control.⁷⁴

What Buñuel does at the level of montage is intentionally to mix two types of material: sequences depicting the Hurdanos, and sequences depicting the natural world in which they live. Yet the camera, by virtue of its objectivity, makes no distinction between the two. For instance, after the scene of the rotting mule carcass (an obvious nod to *Un chien andalou* and a running joke among Lorca, Dalí, Buñuel and Pepín Bello) the film cuts to a fox pulling the carcass across the landscape to a woman and boy picking cherries. From the commentary we learn that the inhabitants of *Las Hurdes* receive cuts from picking the cherries and dysentery from eating them. Here the director establishes, under no uncertain terms, a connection between the intuition of animals and that of man, both eating whatever is available regardless of outcome.

This 'fact' is followed by a sequence in which the Hurdanos perform the monotonous and back-breaking work of creating barricades for growing crops, which furthers the aforementioned analogy of what Fabre calls the 'ignorance of instinct'. The viewer learns that the Hurdanos are fully aware that their endeavour is pointless, since the river often rises and wipes out all of their work in a day – but they carry on, exactly like the sphex described by Fabre. It is pointed out on several occasions that the Hurdanos are incapable of ceasing to do what is harmful: sharing the river with the animals, eating unripe fruits, keeping homes without proper ventilation and practising incest, the latter demonstrating their indifference to western morals. The film effectively enumerates the many ways in which the Hurdanos live out their lives as if they were incapable of breaking their predetermined patterns, patterns placed alongside several shots and sequences of animals and insects whose behaviour is strikingly similar.

Las Hurdes, through its comparisons between human and animal, privileges nothing, except for maybe the very process of documentary production, as evidenced by the conspicuous shooting of the goat, which leads to a fundamental question about the overall orientation of the film as a 'humanizing' project. This was, after all, the ostensible aim of surrealist ethnographic projects, to present humans from varying societies as equal – to humanize across the board. For Ibarz, this is exactly what *Las Hurdes* accomplishes, insofar as the trajectory of the camera brings the Hurdanos before the conscience of the spectator.⁷⁵ However, for Lastra, the film puts forth a 'pseudo-Darwinian process of dehumanization'.⁷⁶ Lastra finds the 'scapegoat' scene, as he calls it, to be

characteristic of the film as a whole, for it both exemplifies the dehumanization of the Hurdanos and thematizes the act of ethnographic representation. It recalls the film's other depictions of

77 Ibid., p. 52.

animals and, more disturbingly, the numerous sequences in which the Hurdanos themselves are equated implicitly or explicitly with beasts.⁷⁷

There is, however, a third way of reading *Las Hurdes* that can synthesize these opposing views.

What is undoubtedly at stake is the film's ethnographic attempt to study and understand foreign peoples without privileging one culture over another, often as a way to better understand oneself and one's own culture. For example, Ibarz writes that: 'it is the Buñuelian way of talking about man (and therefore Buñuel himself) through the Hurdano people. The Hurdes were an extreme example of getting to the bottom of the issue, and the bottom – the ground – was for the surrealists the base of everything.'⁷⁸ The difference is that, for Buñuel, the 'ground' does not end with human activity. Why, for example, does the director include a pedagogical sequence on the difference between anopheles and culex mosquitoes, among other things? In the end, it provides virtually no insight into the nature or worldview of the Hurdano people.

78 Ibarz, *Buñuel Documental*, p. 25.

The sequence in question, which Conley has appropriately subtitled 'Mosquitoes and death', functions as a key to reading the film as a whole.⁷⁹ Here Buñuel, with the help of Lotar, shifts from a closeup of mosquito larvae to a shot of a science book with an illustration of the same type of larvae. This is followed by another closeup of the book, this time showing a different page illustrating the two types of mosquitoes once they are fully grown, anopheles and culex, the difference being that the former carries malaria. The following shot is of a man who is visibly shaking and presumably dying from malaria, implicitly linking the insects to death. More importantly, this sequence sticks out as a complete non-sequitur. Much like the scorpions in *L'Âge d'or*, this pedagogical aside, featured prominently as it is, forces the viewer to ask what is really at stake in the film, to wonder if the mosquitoes are as important as the people whom they infect; the camera certainly treats both parties in the same 'scientific' fashion and with the same amount of abject indifference. This is precisely the point – this strange sequence calls attention to the fact that the inhabitants of Las Hurdes are being put under the microscope in the same fashion as the mosquito larvae featured in the documentary.

79 Conley, 'Documentary surrealism', p. 196.

While Lastra finds this mixing utterly 'dehumanizing', *Las Hurdes*, through an act of comparative biology that highlights the instinct and ignorance of all species, goes straight to the core of human behaviour, making it a fundamentally 'humanizing' enterprise. In a telling statement, one early reviewer, Villegas-López, writing on the occasion of the film's exhibition in Madrid during the third session of the Cinestudio Image, scoffs at the government's ban of the film: 'One should not shatter the mirror, nor prohibit the microscope. This film deserves official protection.'⁸⁰ Indeed, Villegas-López correctly identifies the film's microscopic quality, that is, its attempt to view man in same way as an entomologist might view a sphex.

80 Quoted in Mendelson, 'Contested territory', p. 232.

Going back to the question of *Las Hurdes*'s (de)humanizing character, Ana Balakian has written that surrealism is, at its core, an attempt to locate and bring to the surface what André Breton called *l'entendement humain*:

that enormous reservoir of consciousness which we have not yet probed, that we shall never fully know because of the one really tragic fact of life – the disproportion between man's desire and the individual limits of his life: this subterranean network was what Eluard called the Human Pyramid or the lower reaches of life. It is not the 'moi' but the 'soi', an immense and sober region where existences are joined and recognize each other, where the purposes of nature and the manifestations of the human will can be reconciled.⁸¹

⁸¹ Anna Balakian, 'Is surrealism a humanism?', *Arts and Sciences* (Spring 1965), pp. 1–7, p. 3.

The question is how? The surrealists were, according to Balakian, fundamentally humanists with a utopian vision that was the union of the self. For Caillois, one means by which man could gain access to himself was through comparative biology, precisely because it ignores social constructs and focuses on 'the continuity between nature and mind'.⁸² Caillois, like many of the surrealists, and Buñuel in particular, sees in the insect world an aperture for study which can reveal a great deal about the human condition through 'objective ideograms'.⁸³ These ideograms allow to the surface man's natural instincts which are buried under the rubble of culture. Caillois wrote his article on the praying mantis in 1934 and revisited it several times between then and 1937. My hypothesis is that Buñuel already possessed his own, somewhat distinct notion of 'comparative biology' when he began filming *L'Âge d'or*, one which stemmed from his enthusiastic readings of Fabre.

⁸² Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism*, p. 76.

⁸³ Ibid.

In short, while some (Bataille, Leiris and others) were focusing on ethnography as a means of levelling hierarchies in order to free man from arbitrary cultural boundaries and open a philosophical path for a return to a primitive, Rousseauian state, Buñuel was taking a different path towards a similar end. Like Maeterlinck, who observes that 'there is no hierarchy in the sciences' and finds even the meanest anthill to be a 'replica *in petto* of our own destinies', Buñuel points out the strong correspondence between insect behaviour and human behaviour.⁸⁴ In so doing, he aims to exterminate the presupposed biological hierarchy in which man is placed above other species within the natural world. He accomplishes this by looking at the world through an entomological lens to observe the 'logical irrationality' of man, as seen in both *L'Âge d'or* and *Las Hurdes*.

⁸⁴ Maeterlinck, *Life of the Ant*, p. 17.

Documentary film has, in the past, been linked to surrealism because of its 'ethnographic' capacity for bringing disparate cultures into contact with one another and thereby revealing the arbitrary nature of culture itself. Buñuel, however, nuances this approach to surrealist documentary by showing not what various cultures have in common, but what humans, at the most basic level, have in common with other 'lower' life forms. In so doing he sheds light on the human beings' latent drives and

⁸⁵ Buñuel, *Escritos*, p. 32.

⁸⁶ Gary Indiana, 'The serpentine movements of chance', in a booklet to accompany *The Phantom of Liberty* (New York, NY: Criterion Post, 2005), pp. 6–12.

psychology, that is, their shared primitive nature. In a letter written in 1939, Buñuel distinguishes between two types of documentaries: descriptive and psychological. The former is dubbed boring, while the latter, through a manipulative organization of materials, attempts to 'interpret reality' and possesses the capacity to move the audience emotionally. The experience of making *Las Hurdes*, along with the ensuing scandal that it produced, was foundational for Buñuel. Once he discovered the tremendous effect that a documentary could have on the viewing public, the Spanish director decided that he wanted to continue to work in that vein, by making 'documentaries of a psychological nature'.⁸⁵ He claims to have something particular in mind, but this documentary was never realized, technically speaking. Nevertheless, the entomological anthropology practised in *Las Hurdes*, with its emphasis on natural psychology, recurs in several later films directed by Buñuel. One need only think of the 'logical irrationality', as Gary Indiana calls it, found in *That Obscure Object of Desire* and the *The Phantom of Liberty*.⁸⁶ In telling fashion, the latter film ends with an ostrich staring back at the viewer while the noise of human activity plays in the background. It is a clue to understanding the perspective offered in Buñuel's films from start to finish.

Exile and longing in Abderrahmane Sissako's *La Vie sur terre*

ISABEL BALSEIRO

Part of the series entitled '2000 Seen By', organized with support from the Mission for the Celebration of the Year 2000, *La Vie sur terre/Life on Earth* (1998) is Mali's contribution to French commemorations of the new millennium.¹ Ten independent directors were invited to make a film about the last day of the twentieth century in their countries of origin.

Abderrahmane Sissako, who was born in Mauritania, trained as a filmmaker in the Soviet Union and now resides in France, responded to the invitation by creating a lyrical motion picture on both the nature of exile and the cycles of life for the inhabitants of his father's village. Perhaps, as publicity from one distribution company puts it, 'Sissako's challenge was to make a film about the significance of the start of the twenty-first century for people still struggling to enter the twentieth'; in other words, to show Africa's simultaneous connection to and isolation from modernity.² Into the richly portrayed West African setting, Sissako injects the political and poetic spirit of Martinican Aimé Césaire and his critique of colonialism.

In *La Vie sur terre*, Paris-based director Dramane returns on the eve of the year 2000 to visit Sokolo, the northern Mali village in which his father lives. There he crosses paths with Nana, a young woman who is passing through, and rides his bicycle unhurriedly through alleys, squares and grasslands. In the village, he reflects on the fraught relationships with both Europe and Africa that his exile in France seems to have provoked. Time in Sokolo is measured by the movement of the sun. Word of the approaching millennium reaches the villagers only through foreign radio programmes, and in an example of the local authorities' perennial neglect. While farmers are threatened with starvation by a plague of birds

1 All translations from French and Italian into English, unless marked otherwise, are mine.

2 California Newsreel, *La Vie sur terre* (*Life on Earth*). URL: <http://www.newsreel.org/nav/title.asp?tc=CN0101&s=sissako> [accessed 19 September 2007].

- 3 All film reviews consulted, not surprisingly, equate the character Dramane with Abderrahmane Sissako, for example: Pierre Eisenreich, 'La Vie sur terre', *Positif*, nos 462/463 (1999), p. 153; Philippe Royer, 'La vie comme elle va', *La Croix*, 9 June 1999, p. 22; Claire Vassé, 'La Vie sur terre', *Positif*, nos 449/450 (1998), p. 110; Michael Dembrow, 'Life on Earth/La Vie sur terre' (n.d.), Portland Community College. URL: http://spot.pcc.edu/~mdembrow/life_on_earth.htm [accessed 19 September 2007]. Striking parallels between the two stand out, starting with the name, as Dramane could be short for Abderrahmane. Both are filmmakers exiled in Paris and have a father living in a Malian village near the southeastern corner of Mauritania. While it is important to be aware of the similarities, not limiting oneself to an autobiographical reading of the film, which is, after all, not a straightforward documentary, opens new possibilities.
- 4 See *Le France*. URL: <http://www.abc-lefrance.com/fiches/viesurterre.pdf> [accessed 19 September 2007].
- 5 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: the Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. xi.
- 6 Ibid., p. xi.
- 7 Olivier Barlet, *African Cinemas: Decolonizing the Gaze*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Zed Books, 2000), p. 4 (my emphasis).

raiding their crops, the authorities postpone bringing in aid on account of the millennium celebrations – celebrations nowhere to be seen in the dusty village. Communication between here and other regions of the country – and the rest of the world – requires persistence and a good measure of luck. The ironically named 'Radio Colon' (with its dilapidated transmitter) offers a makeshift library, *la bibliothèque parlée*, in the form of books read by the announcer, and a forum for people to express their voice. This makes the radio as vital to the functioning of the village as the post office, where the only telephone brings together locals who periodically make attempts to reach those beyond Sokolo. Much of the film consists of shots of villagers listening to the radio, making their way to and from the post office, coming across each other by the riverbank or working the rice fields. Such is 'life on earth', where villagers go on foot or by bicycle as well as by donkey. A truck transporting passengers makes a single appearance towards the beginning of the film and a lone motorcyclist dressed in white occasionally zips past at vertiginous speed. Many of these often anonymous characters play themselves, something that has also been said of the director,³ while much of the dialogue seems to have been improvised.⁴ Sissako regales us with subtle and perceptive observations of the quotidian through a powerful voiceover. Music by Salif Keïta and other African musicians and Schubert's piano concertos infuse the film with a melancholic mood. Visually the portrait of the village is composed of earthy colours, geometric shapes and textures, savannahs and mud walls.

In the translators' introduction to Gilles Deleuze's *Cinema 1: the Movement-Image*, Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam argue that the book is a work of philosophy, understanding "philosophy in the traditional sense of the word", the creation of concepts.⁵ For Deleuze, they assert, philosophy is not a reflection on something else but a creation of concepts, 'concepts understood "exactly like sounds, colours, or images, they are intensities which either suit you or don't". Concepts are the images of thought.'⁶ In this essay, I approach Abderrahmane Sissako's *La Vie sur terre* as conceptual cinema, that is, as a cinema of intense creation. Sissako himself has spoken of the film as 'a hymn to justice, love, sharing and respect, understood as a – not especially African – philosophy of life, a life on earth possible even in a *place* where it is difficult to have contact with the earth'.⁷ If one were to take the filmmaker's words literally, Sokolo, the West African village in which the actions unfold, could be viewed as being so peripheral to Europe, which is still the focal point of the film, as to give the (false) impression that life barely takes place there – its very remoteness a marker of its invisibility even in a globalized world. Furthermore, Sokolo's soil does not yield sustenance for its inhabitants, the land almost barren save for the rice fields. With 'place', Sissako may be invoking a spatial absence the film is at pains to represent: the filmmaker's imaginary. The film unfolds less in the physical locality of

Sokolo than through Sissako's images of thought – Sokolo functioning primarily as metaphor, its symbolic weight a vehicle to enable crossings between different locations. Rather than in any immediately identifiable landscape, *La Vie sur terre* takes place in a geography of emotions, in longings, evocations and reminiscences, in the desolation arrived at by an exile as he measures the distance that separates him in metropolitan Paris from his yearned-for homeland.

In *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media and the Politics of Place*, Hamid Naficy argues that 'thanks to the globalization of travel, media and capital, exile appears to have become a postmodern condition'.⁸ An alternative view on exile, one that holds that a range of analytical possibilities must be deployed to counter perceived Eurocentric debates based on postmodernism, would refute this position. The work of Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy has enriched these debates by emphasizing the importance of race in discussions of the nation-state, cultural identity, diasporic formations and unexamined celebrations of postmodern mobility.⁹ Naficy's framing of exile does not preclude the necessity of foregrounding complex histories of voluntary and forced migrations, slavery, colonialism and the postcolony. Exile, in fact, cannot be detached from the historical context that led to global displacements. Invoking a poetics of loss and yearning, *La Vie sur terre* inhabits that postmodern condition so peculiar to the late-twentieth-century transnational world.

Eric Hobsbawm has written that

Home, in the literal sense *Heim, chez soi*, is essentially private. Home in the wider sense *Heimat*, is essentially public. . . . *Heim* belongs to me and mine and nobody else. . . . *Heimat* is by definition collective. It cannot belong to us as individuals.¹⁰

Homeland, on the other hand, always carries with it a sense of the communal, of demands made on a specific geographical space for the sake of a group at times bound by ethnicity, religion or other links.

The nation, a sort of home writ large, has as its political expression nationalism, which, according to Edward Said,

is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture, customs; and, by so doing, it fends off exile, fights to prevent its ravages. . . . Triumphant . . . all nationalisms have their founding fathers, their basic, quasi-religious texts, their official enemies and heroes. This collective ethos forms what Pierre Bourdieu, the French sociologist, calls the *habitus*, the coherent amalgam of practices linking habit with inhabitation.¹¹

Exile occurs when the *habitus* has been ruptured, when life no longer takes place in a familiar space where one was born or has kinship ties. Exiles may have been forced out of their homes by political repression, social upheaval, economic pressure or myriad other forces. Said, himself

8 Hamid Naficy, *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media and the Politics of Place* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), p. 4.

9 Stuart Hall (ed.), *Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997); Paul Gilroy, *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

10 Eric Hobsbawm, 'Exile', *Social Research*, vol. 58, no. 3 (1991), pp. 65–8.

11 Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 176.

12 Ibid., p. xiv.

13 Patricia Seed, 'The key to the house', in Naficy (ed.), *Home, Exile, Homeland*, pp. 85–94.

14 Naficy, quoted in Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

15 John Durham Peters, 'Exile, nomadism, and diaspora: the stakes of mobility in the western canon', in Naficy (ed.), *Home, Exile, Homeland*, p. 30.

16 Ibid., p. 21.

17 Said, *Reflections on Exile*, p. 186.

a Palestinian exile for most of his life, wrote: 'Exiles, émigrés, refugees and expatriates uprooted from their lands must make do in new surroundings, and the creativity as well as the sadness that can be seen in what they do is one of the experiences that has still to find its chroniclers'.¹² With *La Vie sur terre*, Sissako becomes one such chronicler.

To chronicle displacement and disjuncture requires deft handling of time and space, on the crossing of which exile hinges. Spatial as well as chronological shifts occur in exile, as a lost home in space (the patria) is tied to a lost home in time (the past). The history of these shifts etches itself on the exile's memory through the experiencing of an emotion seldom understood: nostalgia. For some, nostalgia springs from capitulation and resignation, from a sense of irretrievable loss of the comfort of the familiar;¹³ others warn about the risks exiles run when they turn the past into a fetish, when life in the diaspora instead of being recreated becomes stunted by the immobilizing pain of memories.¹⁴ Indeed, if we look at the linguistic roots of the term, nostalgia

is a neo-Greek loan translation of the German *Heimweh* (homesickness): *nostos* (return) plus *algos* (pain). At first used to describe the pathologies of those long separated from their homelands, such as sailors, only by the 1920s did nostalgia assume its current sense of wistful yearning for days gone by. The migration of the term from nationalism and medicine to retrospective wishfulness and *Sehnsucht* (yearning) remind us of the degree to which romantic cultural movements in nineteenth-century Europe were often conservative, sometimes even slouching toward fascism (as in the German case).¹⁵

As a manifestation of trauma, nostalgia has been explored in psychoanalysis. In creating a desire for return, exile can turn that desire into a structural element of an individual's psyche when nostalgia becomes excessive.¹⁶ Whereas through destruction of the original home and separation from family, exile can bring out the pathology of nostalgia that is not its only expression:

Seeing the 'entire world as a foreign land' makes possible originality of vision. Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal. . . . For an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally.¹⁷

Living 'against the memory of . . . another environment' coaxes out nostalgia, the pain of return, as it enables the simultaneity of which Said speaks – so that one need not be frozen in the past but rather find in it a protean source for creativity. As a long history of intellectuals in exile

attests, from the banishment of Cicero or Dante to the *fatwa* on Salman Rushdie, from the self-imposed estrangement of Joseph Conrad or James Joyce to the cosmopolitanism of Kazuo Ishiguro, nostalgia can be a springboard for creative agency rather than merely a sequela of loss. It is through this lens on exile that I propose to undertake an analysis of *La Vie sur terre*.

With films such as *Octobre/October* (1993), *Sabriya* (1996), *Rostov-Luanda* (1997) and *Heremakono: En attendant le bonheur/Heremakono: Waiting for Happiness* (2002), Sissako has established himself as a visual chronicler of exile. His cinema follows the trajectory of those living in one place, be it Europe or Africa, but (mentally) inhabiting an imaginary elsewhere. In the case of *Heremakono* the movement is from Africa to Europe, in *La Vie sur terre* from Europe to Africa. His film language, at once poetic and philosophical, gently probes the private recesses of the self. Through minimalist aesthetics Sissako assembles space, light, sound and silence in a manner that invites viewers to grapple with the ambiguities of what at times remains unsaid. Because his characters are psychically anchored in a displaced reality, viewers must be nimble to pursue and trace subtle shifts between geographic locality and mental space. In approaching *La Vie sur terre* as conceptual cinema, one in which exile becomes the locus for intense creation, this essay strives to articulate how Sissako mediates the tensions posed by the experience of separation from and entanglement with the native land and former metropolitan centre. To navigate this elusive terrain, Sissako draws on two authors: Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon. He quotes extensively from Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal/Return to My Native Land*¹⁸ and *Discours sur le colonialisme/Discourse on Colonialism*,¹⁹ and though Fanon makes no immediately recognizable appearance in *La Vie sur terre*, in an interview²⁰ the director has remarked on how the film was inspired by the Introduction to *Peau noire masques blancs/Black Skin White Masks*.²¹ These three texts will be referred to insofar as they inform Sissako's depiction of the tension between cultures and histories that are simultaneously in collision and dialogue. For dialogue, or rather communication, is at the core of *La Vie sur terre*. And the means by which exiles make an effort to communicate with those left behind form the structural elements on which the film's loose narrative is built. Attempts at communication, since the film shows communication to be no easy task, are made through four principal means: letter, radio, telephone and photograph. A final point of discussion will involve the use of voiceover. The film is divided into two unequal parts: the first, and shortest, set in France; the second depicting scenes from a village in Mali.

Paris

As the film starts, the camera moves from the bottom up to reveal a stack of plastic ducks for sale: the mass-produced world of nature in a French

18 Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal/Return to My Native Land*, trans. John Berger and Anna Bostock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969).

19 Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme/Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1972).

20 URL: <http://www.abc-lefrance.com/fiches/viesurterre.pdf>.

21 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986).

22 The village characters play themselves, a recurrent motif in Sissako's oeuvre, while Dramane, the filmmaker, is played by Sissako, thus enabling an autobiographical reading. As Royer, 'La vie comme elle va', p. 153, points out: 'To be more than a documentary and less than a fiction, that is the aesthetic project of *La Vie sur terre*'. Indeed, this work falls somewhere between fiction film and documentary.

department store. Above, the face of a man donning a hat appears. He makes a mocking gesture with his mouth as if quacking like a duck. This is Dramane, the exiled filmmaker through whose consciousness the viewer will experience the world of this fictional documentary.²² The man's rigorously buttoned-up coat and the tilt of his hat, which obstructs part of his face, evoke the sleuth in a detective story attempting to disguise his identity. Dramane strolls about in the overstocked, garish shopping centre. The camera pans from left to right, first recording countless brands of butter and cheese, then shoes, watches, jewellery – an abundance that contrasts sharply with the shortages we will see villagers endure in Sokolo. Mistletoe hanging from refrigeration cases indicates it is the Christmas season, as does the ubiquitous presence of the colour red. In his left hand the man clasps a large stuffed polar bear while in the right he holds a metal shopping basket. We see him going up the escalator, until he is momentarily cut off from the screen. Now the camera merges with the man's field of vision. The sensation of going up an escalator is conveyed as we enter the man's consciousness. A remarkable *rallentando* follows. As the man leaves the subterranean level where we first found him, people behind are seen walking in slow motion – this change of pace had been anticipated by an earlier image of a woman putting on a hat as Dramane crossed her path. We first see the shoppers' legs in slow motion, then just their feet. This visual slowing down signals a subtle transition, capturing the moment the man begins to detach himself from his surroundings. While initially he is shown circulating among others, upon stepping onto the escalator he physically separates from the rest. As he goes up, he disentangles himself from that environment. When he disappears from view, the screen fills with the crown of a magnificent tree in a cross-fade held for almost a minute. Other images of nature follow – a sun at dawn, the red soil of the desert, a herd of cattle.

The barely perceptible transition functions on two levels. First, it serves to uproot the man in the coat from the European setting, an uprooting expressed by the voiceover – a key thread running through the film – when it speaks of his need to leave and return to his place of origin. One of the reasons for going back is his desire to make a film about Sokolo. Second, through the visuals there is a departure from a manufactured, packaged world (the shopping centre with its endless supply of consumer goods) into a natural world, from indoors to outdoors. And as soon as this happens we hear not the disembodied voice of recorded supermarket sales pitches, nor the distant ringing of cash registers but the melodious music of a balafon followed by the sounds of animals – the crowing of a rooster, the mooing of cows. The transition carries us from a cold place (suggested by the refrigerated items, the icy lighting, even the stuffed polar bear) to a warm climate where the sun filters through the branches of the immense tree occupying the entire screen. The man on the escalator thus takes flight from the metropolitan centre that France represents into African reality. Or does he?

Sokolo

To leave Europe is the impulse driving Dramane's desire to return to his father's native village. Suitably, the image that transports him 'home' is that of a tree – an organic whole with root, trunk and branches. It is the strong sense of place, of belonging to the soil, of continuity, that a tree conveys and that exiles lack. At the end of the film, sealing its cyclical structure, the figure of a lone palm tree also appears (this time in the background) as a woman rides a bicycle away from Sokolo. The second and longest part of the film unfurls between these two images. These trees frame the exploration of exile at the centre of Dramane's *desire* for return, and I emphasize the word *desire* because there is, indeed, no return.²³ As is the case with many exiles, there is no homecoming – except through an act of the imagination, which is, precisely, the small miracle accomplished in *La Vie sur terre*. Sissako skilfully recreates the semblance of a return. Dramane's sojourn is an imaginary one, vocalized in the film when, quoting Césaire, he writes to his father:

To leave. My heart was throbbing with an insistent desire to give. To leave . . . I would arrive sleek and young in that country, my country, and I would say to that country whose clay is part of my flesh: 'I have wandered far and I am coming back to the lonely ugliness of your wounds'.²⁴

In 1939, when Césaire was considering returning to Martinique from his self-imposed exile in France, he paid a visit to friend Peter Guberina in Yugoslavia, on the Adriatic coast. It was there that the father of Négritude wrote what would become his most celebrated work, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. In this long poem, he develops a complex prophetic vision through which he imagines the effects of his return to the native land. In the case of authors from Martinique and Guadeloupe, the terms 'home', 'exile' and 'return' are complicated. Since the two islands are part of France, it is not possible to apply to them concepts one might use for postcolonial countries such as Mali or Mauritania, which won their independence from France in 1958 and 1960 respectively. For Césaire, his native land is a 'nothingness', a 'void', and therefore in leaving, Martinicans and Guadeloupeans have nothing to which they could eventually return. It is only later, retrospectively, that Antillean intellectuals can rediscover a 'homeland' by representing the people of the Antilles as already exiled – 'uprooted from Africa and from themselves'.²⁵ *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* explores exile as a long process of recognizing a number of marginalizations: the separation from one's ancestral roots, the self-estrangement caused by colonization, the internalized racism exacted by cultural assimilation into a European identity. These are all topics Césaire's compatriot and friend Fanon wrote about lucidly.

Over half a century after the publication of *Cahier, La Vie sur terre* revives this text, as well as *Discours sur le colonialisme*, recounting an

²³ Curiously, only two reviews consulted coincide with this interpretation which, in my view, is crucial to grasping the exilic nature of the film: Clélia Cohen, 'Le cinéma sur terre', *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 536 (1999), pp. 73–4; Paulette Hacker, 'La Vie sur terre: a Vision of the millenium in post-colonial West Africa', in Will Wright and Steven Kaplan (eds), *The Image of the Twentieth Century in Literature, Media, and Society* (Pueblo, CO: Society for the Interdisciplinary Study of Social Imagery, University of Southern Colorado, 2000). Most critics take as a given the 'fact' that Dramane makes a trip back to Mali (for example: Carlo Chatrjian, 'La vita in terra ha la maestà dell'Africa', *Cineforum*, no. 390 (1999), p. 75; Jacques Mandelbaum, 'Sokolo, village d'Afrique, interpelle le village planétaire', *Le Monde*, 10 juin 1999, n.p.; Eisenreich, 'La Vie sur terre', p. 153; Royer, 'La vie comme elle va', p. 22; and Vassé, 'La Vie sur terre', p. 110).

²⁴ Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, p. 50.

²⁵ Mireille Rosello, "'One more sea to cross': exile and intertextuality in Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*", trans. Robert Postawsko, *Yale French Studies*, vol. 83, no. 2 (1993), p. 179.

26 Edouard Glissant, *Discours antillais* (Paris: Seuil, 1981).

exile's fictional journey to the homeland. Sissako achieves through film what Césaire did through poetry: the evocation of a plaintive meditation on the intractability of departures and returns, and of the ambiguities of ineluctable detours, to borrow from Edouard Glissant.²⁶ Like his predecessor, Sissako composes an elegy for deferred hopes and calls for everyone's right to the 'meeting-place of conquest'. Under the pretext of capturing the arrival of the new millennium in a quiet Malian village, far from the tumult of cosmopolitan Paris, Sissako shows how a world apparently removed from Europe still retains the traces of its colonization. In *La Vie sur terre*, Césaire's texts, written at a time when West Africa was under French rule, underscore how struggles for self-definition retain a relevance for African people. If *Cahier* and *Discours sur le colonialisme* represent two seminal literary and political manifestos of a coming to consciousness on the eve of de-colonization, Sissako appropriates them to remind viewers that Europeans should not avert their eyes from the conditions of life in Africa on the cusp of the twenty-first century. Sokolo may indeed be far from France, as Dramane's fictional return attests, but it is a place indelibly marked by an inheritance of European conquest. To stress this point further, Césaire is quoted at the conclusion of the film:

Upright now, my country and I, hair in the wind, my hand small in its enormous fist and our strength not inside us but above in a voice that bores through the night and its listeners like the sting of an apocalyptic wasp. And the voice declares that for centuries Europe has stuffed us with lies and crammed us with plague, / for it is not true that: / the work of man is finished/we have nothing to do in the world / we are the parasites of the world/our job is to keep in step with the world. / The work of man is only just beginning / It remains for him to conquer/at the four corners of his fervour / every rigid prohibition. / No race holds a monopoly of beauty, intelligence and strength / there is room for all at the meeting-place of conquest / we know now/that the sun revolves round our earth illuminating the plot / which we alone have selected / that every star falls at our command from the sky to the earth/without limit or cease.²⁷

27 Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, pp. 84–5.

In Euzhan Palcy's three-part documentary *Aimé Césaire: Une Voix pour l'histoire*/*Aimé Césaire: a Voice for History*, André Breton describes Césaire as 'a Black man who embodies not simply the Black race but all mankind, who will remain for me the prototype of human dignity'.²⁸ It is this human dignity so amply demonstrated in *Cahier* that Sissako draws on to establish his solidarity with the people of Sokolo, for *La Vie sur terre* depicts the West African villagers as endowed with the universal qualities Césaire claimed for all – and which Europeans so tragically blinded themselves into believing belonged to one race alone. And that is the subject of the second text by Césaire that Sissako makes use of in the film, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, which also serves as a link to Fanon.

28 Aimé Césaire: *Une Voix pour l'histoire* (Euzhan Palcy, California Newsreel, 1994).

29 Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme*, pp. 23–4.

After introducing Césaire's autobiographical poem through Dramane's letter to his father, a letter that weaves in and out of the visual narrative, Sissako ushers in the political essay through Radio Colon, the local radio station broadcast in Bambara. Contrasting with it is *Radio France Internationale* (RFI), the other radio station that firmly establishes the connection between Mali and France, Africa and Europe, at the same time as it registers the distance between them. While RFI, through mechanical-sounding snippets of information, broadcasts exclusively in French, about France, Europe and on first-world matters primarily, Radio Colon puts the emphasis on the homegrown, on what is pertinent to villagers in Sokolo and on an African and Pan-Africanist agenda. Against the pre-recorded programmes of RFI, Radio Colon, staying true to its name as 'La voix du riz, Sokolo, FM' [the voice of the rice fields], offers live interviews with local farmers coping with the difficulties of growing rice and provides educational opportunities through the ingenious 'Spoken Library'. One such broadcast consists of a reading from *Discours sur le colonialisme*; Maiga, the announcer, quotes from the book sent by Dramane:

The great historical tragedy of Africa has been not so much that it was too late in making contact with the rest of the world, as the manner in which that contact was brought about; that Europe began to 'propagate' at a time when it had fallen into the hands of the most unscrupulous financiers and captains of industry; that it was our misfortune to encounter that particular Europe on our path, and that Europe is responsible before the human community for the highest pile of corpses in history.²⁹

Published in 1950, *Discours sur le colonialisme* helped shape the then emerging third-world view of Europe. A scathing denunciation of the brutality of colonizers and of the misery they brought to the colonized, this political manifesto is at once an accusation and a call for liberation that exposes the dehumanizing behaviour of Europeans and the havoc wreaked on black civilizations. Quite presciently, rather than seeing the final days of formal colonization as an end to oppression, Césaire identified US imperialism as a form of exploitation capable of exceeding that of Europe. As Fanon would later do in *Les Damnés de la terre*/*The Wretched of the Earth*, Césaire found in Africa the values he contrasted with those he came to revile in Europe and the USA.

Sissako engages with *Discours* from the vantage point of the impending millennium and what it means for postcolonial Africa. Like Césaire and Fanon almost half a century earlier, the exiled filmmaker also makes a call for African values. Against the *vitesse folle* [mad rush] of Paris, he juxtaposes the measured tempo of life in Sokolo. Following the image of the immense tree occupying the screen, the film title rolls and an arid landscape with a lone tall palm tree and a rising sun appears. What seems like a vehicle, a truck, makes a stop in semi-darkness to drop off a passenger. Someone dressed in casual western clothes, walking

30 I draw on Olivier Barlet's notion of space-time in African cinema for my discussion of these themes in *La Vie sur terre*, see *African Cinemas*, ch. 8.

31 Andrea Caramanna, 'La vie sur terre (*La vita sulla terra*)' (1998), *Expanded Cinema*. URL: <http://www.cinemah.com/neardark/index.php3?rece=384> [accessed 19 September 2007].

32 Barlet, *African Cinemas*, pp. 173–4.

from background to foreground, crosses a field. He looks ahead to a panoramic view of cattle and people moving forward, intermingling. Humans and animals share the space haphazardly yet peacefully, in stark contrast to the delimited personal spaces in the French supermarket. In the absence of such order, a serene image of the landscape emerges. Eventually the camera focuses on the man again, this time in a reflection. First we observe the reflected image of a bicycle. Though at first unable to make out the person riding, we see the shadow of wheels on a river. As the bicycle moves from left to right and a shadow is cast over the water, the front end of a canoe juts into the lefthand side of the screen; then we see Dramane, now dressed in colourful African garb, is being transported inside. In these scenes, the camera embraces the landscape and bodies, situating them in both their geographical and cultural environment. The Malian space, here shown through panoramic establishing shots, is carefully linked to the passing of time.³⁰ The shots capturing the landscape, the sunrise, the peasants and their animals are there to represent time – the time Sissako's narrative requires to create a vision of this village world recorded in movement. As an antidote to the frantic pace of a western metropolis gone haywire with millennium celebrations, *La Vie sur terre* offers the cadence of life at the rhythm of shade.

In one of the most lyrical images of the film, a group of men listening to the radio in the village square perform the ritual of shifting their chairs throughout the day in pursuit of the moving target that is the shade, as the sun slowly moves across the sky. The men reveal the treasures of the everyday and inspire 'a deep nostalgia for something we have lost (we would want time to flow for us as it does for the inhabitants of this village)'.³¹ This nostalgia feeds the elegiac tone of the film. The camera lingers on the leisure these men savour, on their knowledge of how to carve out shelter even in a dry savannah. Ultimately they demonstrate what existence can be like without the 'mad rush'.

For Sissako, space is a measure of time – movements from one shaded patch to the next, from the shadow of a bicycle to that of a canoe, register an acknowledgement of how gradually time passes when one experiences 'life on earth'. In furnishing these details, Sissako conveys the fundamental sense of time Dramane may have lost through exile. In *La Vie sur terre*,

the image gives body to time, not only by the length of the shots but by its spatial economy: the place accorded, for example, to depth of field, which, as in painting, inscribes the subject in space, in the end making the latter the central subject of the film. . . . The time of tradition appears on the screen with the weight and self-evidence of eternity. It is in this sense that . . . Africa is no longer merely the Africa shown by the image, but also the Africa of memory, the Africa of space-time in which the past lives in the present.³²

An instance of this sense of time is offered with a touch of bittersweet humour by Radio Colon's announcer. In the midst of a broadcast he

33 Ibid., p. 175.

informs his listeners that he must leave the station to go perform his duties at his real job: chasing birds from the rice fields. Leaving his French-speaking colleague, Maiga, in charge, the announcer ups and leaves. The significance of this interruption becomes clear in a later sequence when a guest tells his story. The story the visitor relates to the audience reinforces the announcer's priorities: under threat from the birds, the harvest has become endangered not only in Sokolo but also in surrounding villages. What is more, he informs them, the government has forbidden the peasants from killing the birds and yet is not hastening to bring in any aid; quite the opposite: officials are postponing any action until after the New Year's celebrations. Sissako summons viewers 'to situate [themselves] in . . . [that] world, within a general logic which the circular narrative structure imposes as a metaphysic: set against Time, a life is merely a transient episode, but one which inscribes itself in Time, through multiple rites of passages, as a permanently creative act'.³³

At the beginning of this essay, I proposed to approach Sissako's feature as conceptual cinema, for it is a cinema that enacts certain rites of passage to recreate the profound sense of loss implied by exile. To bridge the distance between displacement and country of origin, one such rite utilized is letter-writing. The long letter from Dramane to his father, for example, holds much of the narrative focus in *La Vie sur terre*. Indeed, it is this letter that enables the 'return' – for through it Dramane's desire to leave France and film Sokolo is not only expressed but realized, the writing act becoming performative of his desire. As Dramane jots down thoughts on a blank page, we see him in repeated medium-shots sitting on a chair doing just that, his imagination transporting him to places long left behind, his eyes filling with the contours of faces sorely missed – foremost among them a recurrent closeup of his ageing father. Upright on his bed morning and night, the father holds a letter we can only surmise arrived from Paris, for it is written in French and read through the voiceover narration by Dramane. Words and images in *La Vie sur terre* chase each other, as the film teases out meaning from both. It is the father who holds the letter and whose lips mouth the words, but the son whom we hear reading the contents out loud, not only for the benefit of the old man in Sokolo but for the audience as well. Césaire is quoted at length in that letter, a reference through which Dramane aligns himself with a specific political stance and poetic tradition.³⁴ Through the letter he straddles two spaces in an effort to inhabit them simultaneously: the place of exile, where he forges an alliance with a long line of exiles (like Césaire himself) and the longed-for homeland, to which he retains inalienable ties. The letter is also an intimate gesture of contact between son and father, an expression of the self as it strives to communicate. And in this act of communication lies much of the interplay between self and other, between individual reflexivity and the communal responsibility towards which the film gravitates. In an interview, Sissako explains:

34 One reviewer objects to the extensive use of Césaire's text, 'quite beautiful but finally heavy-handed, the Martinican writer's text only repeats what the film states very well on its own, and in a more lively manner'. Cohen, 'Le cinéma sur terre', p. 74.

35 URL: <http://www.abc-lefrance.com/fiches/viesurterre.pdf>.

36 Ibid.

As one of the characters says in the film, 'Communication is a matter of luck'. Often it works, often it doesn't. There is something more important than the message, the very will to communicate, to try to reach the other. Even if the other cannot hear anything because of a bad connection, he knows that at a certain moment that day someone tried to speak to him. Information as one thinks of it in the West is less important in this particular case where the intention to communicate is stronger. With my family it has always been like that: my intention to communicate has been stronger than its realization.³⁵

Other rites of passage that speak to the need for communication expressed above and that aim to cut the distance between the different spaces an exile inhabits, include the radio programmes already discussed, the use of the telephone and the circulation of photographs.

With the same dogged persistence of villagers trying to stay in touch with the rest of the world by listening to transmissions from RFI, 'We listen to it without hearing, we hear it without listening. It's also a way of bringing modernity into existence: this village is not cut off from the world, it is in communication with it, it is tuned in,'³⁶ they try to establish contact by telephone. In Sokolo the post office doubles as headquarters for Sotelma, Mali's national phone company, and that is where people congregate to make calls.

Among those who, like Dramane, attempt to place their calls are an unnamed woman, a soldier, Cheik Bouya (an Arab merchant) and Nana. A poster on one of the post office's walls proclaims: 'Sotelma: Le téléphone pour tous! C'est notre priorité' [Sotelma: Telephones for all! It's our priority] yet rarely do calls get through – a point made sympathetically by the director and which lends a humorous dimension to the film. As Bina the postmaster tells Dramane after failing to reach France: 'It's ringing in England and I'm calling Paris. It's hard to reach people. It's a matter of luck.'

Against this background of technological difficulties, Sissako displays the richness of human relations present in Sokolo when the postmaster unhesitatingly leaves the telephone headquarters unstaffed to hobble on crutches across unpaved roads to fetch Dramane, who has received a phone call from Marie, the woman in France he had tried to reach in an earlier sequence. Bina explains to Marie that he must go out to find Dramane first, then puts the receiver down and makes his way laboriously to do so. In this scene, the film reveals the ties of solidarity uniting Malians across vast distances, stressing their willingness to help one another rather than be in constant conflict and competition – Bina could have asked Marie to call back later so that the line would have been available for other clients. But instead, despite the physical effort it requires for a disabled man to cross town, he contributes towards making it possible for two people to connect.

Nana tries to phone a man named Bai on several occasions. The first time, she is gently guided by the telephone operator, who instructs her on

how to proceed. He starts by indicating that in order to be able to listen she needs to uncover her ear from under the tightly wrapped headscarf, which she does. He then suggests Nana identify herself and tell the person at the other end of the line where Bai works, so he can be fetched. The next instruction the operator offers is that Nana should request Bai to call her back in five minutes. In a subsequent scene, we see Nana waiting for this phone call. In yet another, the phone rings and, full of expectation, she excitedly lifts her face but the call is not for her. At an earlier sequence, touched by the patiently waiting Nana, the telephone operator suggests an elaborate procedure, 'a secret among the staff':

Telephone operator: 'We'll try cross-transferring. It's the repetition of part, or all of the message. There are three kinds: total compulsory cross-transferring, partial compulsory cross-transferring and optional cross-transferring. There's also what's called excessive or systematic cross-transferring which is to be avoided. Which do you want?'

Nana: 'I'll take the optional.'

Through this enigmatic yet witty theory of telecommunication, Sissako may be obliquely addressing the ambiguities involved in crosscultural communication. Nana's response is quite interesting: of four choices she picks the one over which she may be able to exert greatest control, the 'optional'. If 'cross-transferring' is about contact between different cultures, between Europe and Africa, for example, and about the manner in which that contact occurs, this returns us to the revolutionary texts by Césaire and Fanon. What Sissako ultimately suggests through this sequence is the inevitability of history as well as the responsibilities one contracts as a historical subject: one must choose what kind of cross-transference is to take place. No matter how much Dramane longs for his roots, he remains suspended between Paris and Sokolo, his voice spread across the spatial and cultural duplicity of exile, as suggested in the letter to his father, where he writes about the self (in exile at the moment of writing) in an attempt to recover glimpses of his past.

Beyond that first letter, whose spoken text moves the narrative along, a second letter appears halfway through the film. The plaintive sounds of a flute accompany a letter being dictated for a brother in France: 'Dear Brother, I received your letter . . . with your gifts, which made us very happy'. A man initially seems to speak directly to the camera, the reverse-shot offscreen, but the dictation turns into a voiceover, as the medium-shot of the man is replaced by scenes of the post office, the tailor shop, a group of men crossing the village, women fetching water from a well. Making a plea, the man concedes, 'It's not easy. Just a little help,' explaining, 'we know the difficulties of being in exile. But here are different kinds of difficulties. Maybe this New Year brings fewer hardships. May God bring less hardship. Much less.' As he continues to speak, we never see the scribe – the fact that he makes use of one pointing to illiteracy among villagers in Sokolo.

When asked in an interview what message he intended to convey through the use of Césaire in *La Vie sur terre*, Sissako responded:

Certain things must nevertheless be said because when real questions are not posed, solutions cannot be found. Personally, I think that there is simply a lack of will to understand this continent. The explanations are often hasty and we forget how recent decolonization is, thirty-five years ago. Before that there was an entire century during which deportation of ten million human beings took place. There is trauma, and a very deep wound. It is important, as has been done at certain times in history, to make acknowledgements, to ask for forgiveness – and in this case, this has not been done and it is too late. It is a pity for Europe because that would have been to say ‘let’s build a new world together’. That has not happened, I regret it, and that is what the texts by Césaire are saying. One cannot build by destroying another.³⁷

Among the things that ‘must nevertheless be said’, the brother’s letter would suggest, are the hardships villagers encounter, the dire circumstances driving their pleas to the emigrant community, the dependence on money from abroad to buy water and medicine. Funds from Europe have become a matter of survival, he intimates to his brother – because in Sokolo, as in many parts of Africa and countries in the South, remittances from abroad can spell the difference between life and death. All of which is not unrelated to the fact that the economies of many third-world countries, at the turn of the millennium, rely on foreign aid and find themselves at the mercy of international organizations like the World Bank and the IMF. As one reviewer has incisively noted, metaphorically, ‘*La Vie sur Terre* is a letter from the South to the North that we must listen to’.³⁸ The beauty of Sissako’s filming, and Dramane’s writing, lies in the fact that instead of making an openly political work, say in the vein of Ousmane Sembène’s *Guelwaar*,³⁹ deeply politicized thought is conveyed through the intimacy of messages from son to father, brother to brother. In *La Vie sur terre* the social emerges from the personal and the collective consciousness through individualized memories. Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, meanwhile, reflects that same ‘appeal to collectivity with which Sissako also imbues his film’.⁴⁰ The filmmaker expresses that,

Aimé Césaire has been a support all my life. He’s an author I read and reread. But another writer has been very important for me, Frantz Fanon. The introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks* is very close to this film. There he says ‘The explosion will not happen today. It is too soon, or too late. I do not come with timeless truths. Nevertheless I think it would be good if certain things were said. These things I am going to say, not shout. For it is a long time since shouting has gone out of my life.’⁴¹

In an epigraph to the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon quotes from Césaire’s *Discours sur le colonialisme*: ‘I am talking of

37 Ibid.

38 Extract from an article by Christophe Loizillon. URL: <http://www.brynmawr.edu/french/005/vie/vie.html> [accessed 30 September 2007].

39 *Guelwaar*, Sembène’s 1992 film, is a scathing critique of western foreign aid to African countries. Rather than suggesting that Sembène’s choice for direct political work is less effective than Sissako’s, my point is that countless ways of delivering a message can be found and that the range of film styles available opens rather than limits a filmmaker’s capacity to express ideological commitment.

40 Hacker, ‘*La Vie sur terre*’, p. 371.

41 URL: <http://www.abc-lefrance.com/fiches/viesurterre.pdf>. Here Sissako is quoting from memory Fanon’s introduction and leaving out certain sentences. The translation I provide for that text is by Markmann.

42 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 9.

millions of men who have been skilfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, abasement'.⁴² If *Discours sur le colonialisme* is a denunciation of colonialism and the deep historical wounds it inflicted on the colonized, *Peau noire masques blancs* probes those wounds at the psychological level. In his seminal study of black–white relations, Fanon lays bare the effects of race prejudice on the colonized in a search for the individual behind the stereotype. Like Césaire, Fanon believes in the universality of the human condition. It is on this quite simple yet crucial point that all three converge: Césaire expresses it in his poetry and political work, Fanon reading Césaire and elaborating his far-reaching psychoexistential theories, and Sissako drawing from the two independently of each other as well as from the correspondence between them. From these poetic, political and philosophical strands Sissako creates his own aesthetics to emphasize the universality of Africans.

For me this film is not just addressing a contemporary western or European audience but everyone. I do not see how any process can be positive today if it is based on culpability. That must be avoided at all costs. My objective is not to create guilt. I am a world citizen and I address myself to the world.⁴³

43 URL: <http://www.abc-lefrance.com/fiches/viesurterre.pdf>.

In reminding the audience (whoever it may be) about the state of affairs in a small village in Mali at the turn of the century, Sissako, like Fanon in his introduction, raises questions about the consequences of colonialism, not because a culprit must be found but because history still needs to be acknowledged and owned. Not without a touch of irony, Sissako applies himself to the task of raising consciousness about conditions in postcolonial Africa. It takes an exile living at the centre of the former metropolis, Dramane, to send an anticolonial treaty (*Discours sur le colonialisme*) written, ultimately, by a French citizen so that it can be broadcast to West African peasants by a radio station named after Christopher Columbus. Metaphorically, it takes that same exile to write a letter from South to North to call for social responsibility and solidarity – something both Césaire and Fanon previously, in different tones and forms, advocated through their writings.

But beyond the use of Césaire's prophetic poem about an exile's longings for his native land, other signs in *La Vie sur terre* suggest that Dramane's return to Sokolo does not materialize. There is no actual departure, no transition to speak of – Dramane appears suddenly in the African savannah after the initial supermarket sequence – and curiously, upon arrival, the exiled filmmaker is not welcomed home by either relatives or friends. Nor is he greeted, more importantly, by his father, whose presence within the film consists mostly in shots of him sitting by his bed, endlessly rereading his son's letters. Given the significance of arrival for those who have been absent from their native soil for long periods, and the father's deep attachment to his son, it would seem natural that the film should represent such a joyous occasion or, at the

44 Philippe Roger, 'Prendre le temps', in *La Vie sur terre: Un film d'Abderrahmane Sissako lycéens au cinéma 2001–2002*. URL: http://www.rhonealpes.fr/content_files/La%20vie%20sur%20terre.pdf [accessed 30 September 2007].

very least, hint at its occurrence. Above all, the omnipresence of the voiceover by Dramane (linking what often seem to be random vignettes) strongly indicates that behind it a man speaks from a distance, reminiscing in exile, at once pondering and presaging, conjuring up what a possible return might look like. Memory emancipated from reality and recorded in cinematic text becomes home – perhaps the only home stable enough for the displaced.

The use of photography to encode personal history is an important element of *La Vie sur terre*. Sissako pays special attention to the photographer, who, along with the postmaster and the radio announcer, is one of the principal characters in the community. With his ancient-looking pinhole camera standing on a tripod, he waits for customers in the village square. This outdated apparatus recalls the earliest types of camera used in cinema,⁴⁴ and Sissako uses this similarity to comment on the art of filmmaking, while at the same time accentuating the idea of mirror images and reflections at play in the film. The cinematic camera proves to be the optimal medium to create a representation of the absence provoked by exile; through the lens, the filmmaker mediates between reality (the physical place, Sokolo) and its reflection (the emotional space, an evoked Sokolo). The photographer thus forms part of the *mise-en-scène* in a film that strives to hold onto images of a vanished reality: home. From Paris, Dramane dreams of filming village life with the same intensity as the photographer who labours to capture a moment that will be fixed in time and eventually become a link to the past. This *mise en abyme* (Dramane conjuring images of a photographer seizing another's image, a frame within a frame) is at once playful and reflexive. Both photographer and filmmaker create and preserve images that chronicle the rituals of exile – one from the site of origin, the other from exodus.

The framing of the photographer as he sets up in the main square in an early sequence is quite specular. Nana is having her measurements taken in order to have some clothes made. While she is carefully framed by the threshold of the tailor's shop, she looks out at the photographer, who is placed between two wooden poles; these images are shown as shot/reverse-shot. In another instance, Nana poses for the photographer as the hairdresser looks on. She has just come out of the tailor's shop and walks directly towards the makeshift bench the photographer provides for customers. As she sits down, he remarks, not without a hint of jealousy, that she has been spending too much time at the tailor's. She makes a request that the portrait should include her headscarf; gently, the photographer lifts her chin before taking the picture. Nana smiles naturally. The entire exchange is witnessed by the hairdresser, who cuts hair *al fresco* in the same square, a mirror behind him hanging on a wall.

That mirror, time and again, serves to provide a frame within a frame. The first sequence in which we encounter a mirror image is while Dramane chats with Nana as he shaves. With a humorous touch, but also emphasizing communal life, Sissako shows his character taking a shower in what seems to be a public space: though surrounded by mud walls, the

'bathroom' lacks a ceiling, which permits viewers to see Dramane's head. His colourful clothing hangs over a wall. In one of her many crossings, Nana goes by and greets Dramane. While they chat, the reverse-shot to Nana's face is of Dramane looking at himself in a small mirror as he proceeds to shave. Reflective imagery has been introduced much earlier in the film when we first notice the figure of the rider reflected on the river – we later realize this is Nana on her way to Sokolo. As her bicycle traverses the screen from left to right the shadow of a canoe gliding along the river is cast over the water.

Another image of a mirror appears when an older woman poses for the photographer. She asks him whether she can laugh, and once he assures her she can she does so. Then he tells her not to move, with the consequence that her laughter becomes frozen in a grimace. We then see the photographer taking the picture, but instead of seeing it directly we watch a reflection of that shot in the mirror behind the hairdresser – who is now clipping somebody's hair while fixing his gaze elsewhere. He is absorbed not by the picture being taken but by the sight of Nana crossing the square on her bicycle.

In a subsequent sequence, an older man wearing a cone-shaped hat and in full regalia is having his picture taken. In this instance, the photographer and filmmaker actually compete for the subject's attention. Cross-eyed and aware of being filmed, the man seems to hesitate between fixing his gaze on the photographer's or the director's camera – finally settling for the photographer's. With the hairdresser looking on once again, viewers glimpse the image he sees as it is reflected in the mirror to his left.

The idea of reflection, of mirrors or mirroring, is made explicit through the clever use of photography. Nana, the older woman and the cross-eyed man have their pictures taken by a professional to preserve a familiar image they hope to carry with them after they leave – or perhaps to give to others. Far from Sokolo, the portraits will serve as reminders of home and imagined representations of one's native land serve to diminish absence. Sissako's camera renders reality malleable through a multiplicity of angles, always inviting yet another way of seeing, images of the past intermingling and in dialogue with those from the present. Visually, as well as metaphorically, reflection crosscuts *La Vie sur terre*, since Dramane, the exiled son speaking from France, in telling us about his desire (*le désir de filmer Sokolo*) projects it onscreen; in diegetic time, the film records village life in Sokolo.

The self-reflexivity introduced by the use of photography is further reinforced in the film through the voiceover narration. Some discussion of this was undertaken earlier in this essay through an analysis of the quoted passages by Césaire. Here I will limit myself to exploring how the voiceover narration creates the illusion of return by mediating tensions between exilic space and native land.

By now the structuring elements of the film's narrative have been identified as the letters, radio broadcasts, telephone conversations and photographs that villagers in Sokolo make use of when communicating

with those beyond its confines. Perhaps the greatest effort at communication originates not in Mali but rather in Paris. This longing is most tangible in the melancholic voiceover narration and the carefully worded question Dramane asks:

Dear Father, You will be surprised, perhaps even concerned, at receiving a letter from me. Let me start by saying I'm well and I hope you are too. Despite the message I had Jiddou give you, a change in me makes me want to come home to Sokolo. The desire to film Sokolo, the desire to leave, as Aimé Césaire said. Especially because it is nearly the year 2000, which I am sure will bring no improvement, as you must well know. Is what I learn far from you worth what I forget about us?

The remainder of the film is an attempt to answer that question by representing through images and their carefully framed reflections those who have been left behind and are at risk of oblivion. *La Vie sur terre* is Dramane's willed act of remembering through an imaginary return. Through sounds, colours and shapes, the fictional filmmaker's voice compels us to resist forgetting. Towards the end of the film Nana's portrait suggests some of the loss that accompanies forgetting. Hers is the only picture we are allowed to see after the photographer has taken it. While posing, her face registers extremes of emotion, from a radiant smile to an expression of deep affliction. When the picture is developed, the tailor remarks on how unaware he had been of her sadness. Taken shortly before she departs from Sokolo, Nana's portrait renders visible the internal sadness that presages exile. The voiceover conveys much of that melancholy through the letter Dramane reads to his father over a period of three days and that gives continuity to the narrative. Melancholy seeps in through the gentle pace of the shooting as well as the soundtrack, particularly the song that opens and closes the film and that seals its circularity. Salif Keïta's 'Folon' lends a plaintiveness to the act of recollection that Sissako invites us to witness. In evoking Africa's past and present,⁴⁵ 'Folon' is most appropriate for a film where an exile remains suspended between the two. Heard at the beginning of *La Vie sur terre*, the chant sets the tone for Dramane's interior journey; heard at the end, it resonates in the mind of viewers as the final images vanish.

Towards the end of the film, the voiceover narration no longer forms part of the letter to the father with which the second part began. The focus has shifted and that voice is now addressing the audience. The last image is that of Nana with a suitcase on the back of her bicycle as she rides off into the horizon – moving from foreground to background. It is then that 'Folon' is repeated, Salif Keïta's voice suggestive of a timeless cycle of arrivals and departures.

In a passage from *Cahier*, quoted earlier in the essay, the voiceover speaks of the need to understand oneself in relation to one's country. Spatially, Dramane may live in France, but emotionally he remains intimately linked to Mali. His nostalgic gaze over the village, piercing

45 Thomas Daddesio, 'La Vie sur terre: cultural monologue in the era of globalization', 2004, URL: <http://www.pitt.edu/AfShome/f/r/frit/public/html/ancrage/ThomasDaddesio.html> [accessed 28 September 2007].

46 Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, p. 78.

the distance that separates him in Paris from his place of origin, is imbued with Césaire's plea: 'All that I would wish is / to answer the universal hunger / the universal thirst'.⁴⁶ *La Vie sur terre* thus explores the fragile set of relations between a population that lives physically away from the *Heimat* and those remaining in the *habitus*. In the context of Africa, this illustrates the postmodern condition alluded to – for millions of Africans (and others) are now dispersed in the diaspora. It is in that context that Sissako raises the unavoidable question of social responsibility in the postcolony.

Far from being a distancing technique, the voiceover represents the consciousness of the filmmaker, a consciousness with which the viewer learns to identify. In African cinema, this use of voiceover harks back to one of its founding moments: to the voice of the cart driver in Ousmane Sembène's *Borom Sarret* (1963). In *La Vie sur terre*, in which Sissako reminds us of the need for solidarity, that of the self towards others, of the individual towards the family, of Europe towards Africa, the voiceover is sustained through an affirmation of the ties that bind human beings despite geographical borders.

At the beginning of this essay I proposed to approach *La Vie sur terre* as conceptual cinema, a cinema that insists on intense creation as it fluidly navigates the geography of emotions awakened by the experience of exile. Those emotions are given expression most vividly through the crumbling majestic walls of Sokolo's abandoned houses, among whose ruins Dramane and Nana meander on bicycle. Half the structures lie derelict; the village emptied out of a great number of its inhabitants – who might make (or not) the occasional pilgrimage back. Tahar Chikhaoui persuasively argues that the bicycle functions as 'the intrafilmic relay of the camera to the extent that it carries the filmmaker's gaze'.⁴⁷ The continuity of the gaze (Dramane's) and the discontinuity of the object observed (Sokolo in the distance, home through exile) generates the tension that displacement inflicts on those who have left, those who might forget. Yet the lyrical effect of Sissako's filming resides in the mediation he imaginatively establishes between the two. His mediation, indeed, nudges viewers into the meditative, elegiac mood of his paean to Mali.

La Vie sur terre inserts into the quotidian Malian village the figure of a man who once left it, a man who mourns his own departure as he projects his thoughts onto the screen. Césaire's poem reflects an appeal to collectivity, something that permeates the film. Sissako employs individualized memories to build a collective consciousness. It is Dramane's acceptance of wandering, as he mediates between homeland, displacement and return, that affirms his exile; the desire to film Sokolo engenders a process of recognition, the longing for departure bearing witness to the loss.

47 Tahar Chikhaoui, 'La Vie sur terre: la panne (de l'Afrique) et le secours (de l'image)' / 'La Vie sur terre: (Africa's) breakdown and (image's) assistance', *Écrans D'Afrique/African Screen*, vol. 24 (second semester, 1998), p. 119.

Winsor McCay's warped spaces

J.P. TELOTTE

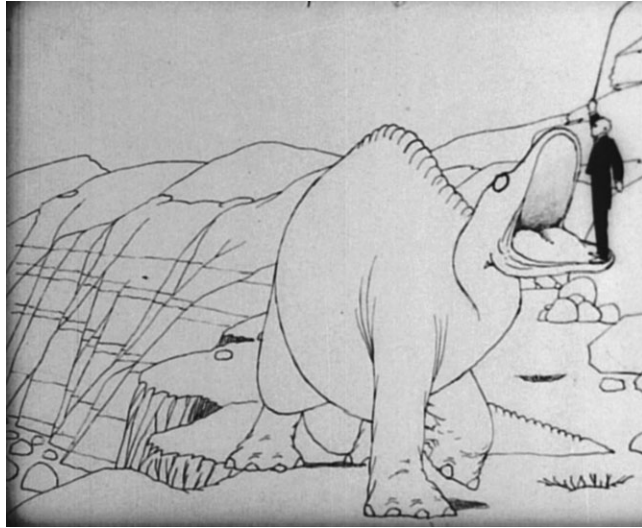
An oft-repeated anecdote of early film history recounts how audience members at the Lumiere brothers' first screening of their *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896) recoiled in fear as the train moved from deep background towards the foreground and eventually off the frame, as if anticipating that the mechanism were emerging from the screen and entering into their world. Though possibly spurious,¹ this story is so frequently recounted precisely because it suggests the phenomenal power of these first projected images, while also hinting at the new cinematic mechanism's ability to suture – somewhat disturbingly – the reproduced world and the real world of human experience, to link two rather different sorts of space. I recall this anecdote because of its curious parallel in animation history, as Winsor McCay reversed this fear-inducing effect with his famed vaudeville piece *Gertie the Dinosaur* (1914).² Accompanying his cartoon, McCay presented himself as the trainer of his animated dinosaur and, at the act's conclusion, appeared to walk into the cartoon's space, there to be taken up by Gertie and move off into the deep background, perched atop her head. Of course, that movement from offscreen space into the depth of the filmed world was apparently meant for a rather different effect, one of amusement and awe rather than fear, thanks to the manner in which it toys with reality, emphasizing the skills of the showman/ animator and the constructed nature of the filmic space. And yet it is an effect that, I suggest, still carries its own weight of anxiety because of the kind of modernist attitude towards space that it demonstrates – an attitude that represents an important legacy for the animated cartoon.

Much of the critical discussion surrounding the early history of animation has recently come to focus on its shifting relationship to the avant garde, with a particular emphasis on how the early cartoon

1 In his history of the cinema, Robert Sklar repeats this common account, noting that 'legend has it that some spectators panicked as the engine appeared to come closer'. See Robert Sklar, *Film: an International History of the Medium* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2002), p. 30. David A. Cook, albeit with a rather more pronounced scepticism, similarly reports that 'audiences are said to have dodged aside at the sight of the locomotive hurtling toward them into the foreground of the screen'. See David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film*, 3rd ed. (New York NY: Norton, 1996), p. 11.

2 McCay reproduced this well-chronicled vaudeville act as a complete film, one in which we see him standing beside the screen on which his animated dinosaur performs and addressing her through conventional title cards. The film version frames this performance with scenes in which he bets with some friends at a gentlemen's club that he can reproduce a dinosaur and then shows elements of the animation process.

Gertie the Dinosaur
(Winsor McCay, 1914)



especially, with its essentially flat, fluid and even reflexive characteristics, was often perceived as effecting the same sort of challenge to the status quo as did much of modernist art. Esther Leslie typifies this perspective in her comparison of early developments in animation to an avant-garde movement that ‘takes fragmentation and disintegration into its law of form, making clear how constructed not only it is but also the social world – ripe for transformation’.³ And following this same focus on the ideological implications of animation, Paul Wells reminds us of how the ‘positioning of animated films as merely populist texts’ has ‘proved to be inhibiting in properly acknowledging its omnipresent significance as a potentially radical art form’.⁴ That emphasis on formal parallels between animation and avant-garde art in terms of both technique and political intention, though, has tended to gloss over the nature of some of those connections, particularly the manner in which early animation addresses one of its most fundamental properties, the space that the animator or cartoonist must fill up or leave empty,⁵ the space that through his or her own creative efforts the animator must, like McCay in *Gertie the Dinosaur*, almost literally enter. I want to suggest that, when we look more closely at how McCay’s films engage with space, we can see another dimension of that modernist spirit at work, for we find that his work implicates an assault not simply on the social status quo, but also on what we might term the phenomenological status quo, that is, on both the organization of, and the audience’s experience of, space itself.

In his study of space, culture and architecture in the early modern era, Anthony Vidler provides us with an important lead in this direction. For he notes that the turn of the century introduced, along with insights into psychology and culture, a new sense of space, one that he terms ‘warped space’, and he suggests that this development was so crucial that we

³ Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant Garde* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 122.

⁴ Paul Wells, *Animation and America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), p. 1.

⁵ Famed animator Chuck Jones has repeatedly stressed the significance of this confrontation with space, noting that one of the most fundamental ‘goals in drawing is to achieve an object working in pure space’. See Maureen Furniss (ed.), *Chuck Jones: Conversations* (Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), p. 31.

6 Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), p. 5.

7 Ibid., p. 8. Here Vidler describes this new sense of space as resulting from a kind of cultural 'crisis of identity', as 'the landscapes of fear and the topographies of despair [were] created as a result of modern technological and capitalist development' (pp. 2–3).

8 Ibid., p. 1.

9 Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 11.

10 Vidler, *Warped Space*, p. 100.

11 Donald Crafton, *Before Mickey: the Animated Film 1898–1928* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), p. 48. As Crafton explains, the 'lightning sketch' was 'a hybrid of graphic and performing art', involving an illustrator-monologist who would sketch a subject and then, in response to his commentary, quickly alter it into a series of changing representations. The aim was to amaze the audience by both the speed of the artist's alterations and the seeming ability of his subjects 'to move, spontaneously change their shape, or become "real"' (p. 50).

12 Michael Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons: American Animation in its Golden Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 33.

13 Leonard Maltin, *Of Mice and Magic: a History of American Animated Cartoons* (New York, NY: New American Library, 1980), p. 3.

14 Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands*, p. vi.

might well think of it as 'the leitmotiv of modernity itself'.⁶ Drawing on the work of Freud, Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel, he describes how the new urban world – that which was populated by the audience for the equally new phenomenon of film – had become invested not only with a fresh awareness of what we might term *internal spaces* or psychological space, but also, and corresponding to these internal spaces, with a variety of space-oriented neuroses and phobias resulting from processes of 'psychological projection or introjection'.⁷ As part of this investment, space was no longer simply perceived to be a 'stable container' or neatly measurable realm, but was increasingly seen 'as a product of subjective projection', an inconstant and shifting world best described by the emerging vocabularies of 'displacement and fracture, torquing and twisting, pressure and release, void and block', and one that popularly measured out, particularly among the new urban populations, a rising sense of alienation and even agoraphobia.⁸

The result is that artists and architects, as well as cartoonists and animators whose fundamental task was, of course, to give shape to or fill up a spatial void, also had to address or account for this 'architectural uncanny', as Vidler terms it.⁹ With traditional notions of centre and periphery effectively disappearing, they would find it necessary to break the boundaries of convention in order to depict space in these new ways, seeking to 'produce effects of techniques of movement and space-time interpenetration', perhaps most famously demonstrated in a work such as Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912).¹⁰

McCay is especially well-positioned in film history to help us gauge this new world of 'warped' or uncanny space and its impact on the early development of animation. For his work, as Donald Crafton has shown, clearly straddles rather different eras and approaches to the drawn world. His early manner of presentation, drawing on the model of the vaudeville performance and capitalizing on the practice of what has been termed the 'lightning sketch', tends to frame him less as a cartoonist – that is, as someone who has created a drawn product for the audience's entertainment or amusement – than as an entertainer himself, someone who primarily aims to amaze viewers with his technique.¹¹ And McCay generally drew in what Michael Barrier describes as 'an elaborate illustration style',¹² honed during his time as artist-reporter at the Cincinnati *Commercial Tribune* and cartoonist for the New York *Herald*, that was clearly ill-suited to the pace and procedures of an industrial animated cartoon production, and that seems far removed from the world of the avant garde. And yet as Leonard Maltin notes, McCay's films also seem to offer 'a continuous parade of movement, metamorphosis, and exaggeration',¹³ precisely the sort of features that would quickly become synonymous with the new animated cartoon. In fact, one of the most striking characteristics of his films is their almost self-conscious devotion to motion and change – elements that also align them with what Leslie describes as the modernist 'universe of transformation, overturning, and provisionality'.¹⁴

15 Ibid., p. 12.

16 Paul Virilio, *The Last Dimension*, trans. Daniel Moshenberg (New York, NY: Semiotext(e), 1991), p. 112.

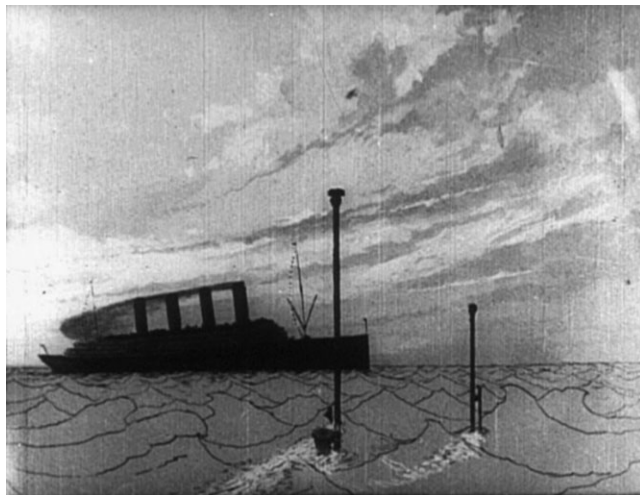
17 Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, p. 10.

18 Vidler, *Warped Space*, p. 2.

And yet, in her account of early animation's links to modernist art Leslie almost dismisses McCay's efforts, simply noting that they 'were detailed, beautiful, and took many months to produce'.¹⁵ That hint of disregard seems to result from the mixed nature of his work described above, as it perhaps too easily assigned him to the rank of entertainer – admittedly of an innovative sort – while paying too little attention to the nature of his entertainments, and particularly to the aesthetic of 'movement . . . and exaggeration' that his films were gradually developing and that would become one of his key legacies. In his discussion of modernist art in the early twentieth century, Paul Virilio describes how its development brought with it 'a crisis of representation' due not only to the disappearance of a stable sense of space, as conventional space seemed to become a 'lost dimension' of everyday life, but also to the way in which it was being replaced by the often disorienting experiences of speed and motion.¹⁶ And in McCay's films, I would suggest, we can glimpse important elements of this ongoing development, elements that despite Leslie's near dismissal of his work, give reason to Michael Barrier's description of him as 'the first American animator of consequence'.¹⁷

On the simplest level, we can see how McCay's films repeatedly invest space with the kind of anxiety that results in a version of that 'warped' or 'phobic space' Vidler has described.¹⁸ As a most obvious instance we might briefly consider his most pointedly realistic effort, *The Sinking of the Lusitania* (1918), a film that achieves its propagandist shock effect by interweaving two very different spatial conceptions: a literal concern with actual space and a stylized treatment of space. For on the one hand, as part of what a title card describes as the 'historical record', the film dramatically details the headline-making event of its title, showing how danger emanates from the unseen depths of the sea, with a German submarine's periscope glimpsed above the water and then its torpedoes

The Sinking of the Lusitania
(Winsor McCay, 1918)



19 Crafton, *Before Mickey*, p. 116.

20 Vidler, *Warped Space*, p. 8.

21 Wells, *Animation and America*, p. 33.

22 Ibid., pp. 31, 30.

23 Ibid., p. 31.

suddenly striking the British liner, causing it to explode and sink—all rendered in what Crafton describes as a ‘realistic graphic style’, reinforced by an editing technique that imitates newsreels of the day like the *Universal Weekly*.¹⁹ But on the other hand, it uses the stylistic possibilities implicit in that real space of anxiety to add a further unsettling dimension, as if the submarine lurking in those depths were metaphoric of another sort of anxiety or threat. More specifically, we see the almost abstractly rendered blank surface of the sea — essentially a sea of white space that is also the nearly undifferentiated space of the film frame — swallow up the carefully drawn and detailed victims of the attack, fashioning in its collision of styles an effective visual anxiety and suggesting a dangerous void. What McCay managed to tap into with this spatial combination was a kind of fear of space that, as Vidler has chronicled, was ‘forged in the early modernist period itself with the introduction of . . . psychological projection or introjection’.²⁰

Responding primarily to its ideological thrust, Wells has fittingly described this film as ‘a seminal moment in the development of the animated film’,²¹ as it effectively combined near-documentary elements with a pointedly propagandist impulse. In that very combination he sees a tracing of ‘the contradictions of the modern age’, and especially of ‘animation as a Modernist practice’.²² Yet beyond its rather obvious ideological implications, as I suggest above, this film points to a kind of stylistic difficulty — or perhaps a contradiction — that we can see being negotiated successfully here and that surfaces in various ways in McCay’s other films as well. Particularly, and as a follow-up to Wells’s assessment of the ‘contradictions’ at work in *Lusitania*, I want to suggest that we view McCay’s animated work as an effort at balancing what we might term created space with the film frame’s negative space. The former takes shape from both a dominant realist aesthetic of the period and McCay’s own grounding in what Wells terms ‘a journalistic mode of representational realism’,²³ both of which invited efforts at naturalistic reproduction. The latter denotes the nagging emptiness of the frame that was the fundamental condition and starting point of both animated and live-action film. That negative space was always laden with anxiety, or hints of the uncanny, because it automatically evoked both the element of ‘psychological projection or introjection’ of which Vidler speaks — that is, the world of repressed forces and unseen depths whose power Freud had just begun to explore and articulate in this period — and the basic difficulty of creation itself, of filling up the void with images drawn from within. The drama to which *The Sinking of the Lusitania* attests and which it purports to record, then, is not just that of the real historical event, but also that implicit in the pregnant spaces of every frame and every image. In the way he exploits the tension between these spaces, McCay effectively underscores an important if generally overlooked link between animation and the avant garde: a reminder not simply of animation’s subversive possibilities and ideological positioning, but also

of its ability to tap into the evocative, even disturbing, power of space itself.

As examples of the sort of tension or negotiation I am describing, I want to turn to two of McCay's films that correspond to two key dimensions of his career: his vaudeville experience and his newspaper cartoon background, particularly his comic strip 'Little Nemo in Slumberland'. For the former I want to consider *Bug Vaudeville* (1921), a film that, while not employing the sort of stage interaction between the animated world and the real world that we see in a film like *Gertie the Dinosaur*, presents its material as if it were part of a vaudeville-style show. In effect, it deploys that vaudeville dynamic, the supposed live performance, as a crucial support for its narrative. For the latter I want to look at *The Flying House* (1922), a cartoon in the vein of McCay's various 'Dreams of a Rarebit Fiend' efforts, all of which drew on his previous newspaper work, which often depicted wildly exaggerated adventures resulting from a spicy dish eaten before retiring. Of course, both are actually set up as dream narratives, and thus ultimately suggest a level on which McCay's films almost invariably proceed from an oneiric impulse, one that, as with all dreaming, always seems to be negotiating between our sense of real space and imaginary space, and thus is always speaking to the sort of spatial negotiation that, as I have suggested, seems fundamental to much early animation.

Like many other McCay films, *Bug Vaudeville* begins with a realistic rationale for its ensuing fantastic imagery, as a tramp emerges from behind a stand of elaborately drawn trees, announces in a title card that he's 'sleepy', and anticipates the narrative to follow by observing that 'Cheese cakes are bad. They make me have such queer dreams.' That verbal context punctuates examples of McCay's 'painstakingly realistic' animation, as Michael Barrier has described it:²⁴ highly detailed images of trees, bushes, plants, and of the tramp himself, all framing an empty white central background that hints at a dream space that is about to open up to him and to the audience. That mise-en-scene of elaborately-drawn foreground and negative space in the rear of the frame then reverses ground, as a curtain appears and a title card announces 'The Program'. A series of sketchily-realized bugs engaged in dancing, juggling, bicycling, tumbling and boxing acts appear in mid-frame, all of them set against highly detailed vaudeville-style backdrops. This reversal of ground is noteworthy because it underscores the fakery inherent in these elaborately-conceived backdrops' false perspectives, establishing space here as itself a kind of performance, the work of the artist, much as McCay himself established it in his vaudeville stint with *Gertie the Dinosaur*.

At the same time, the various elements of the 'show' – backdrop, stage area, performing bugs, proscenium arch, and so on – point towards a new negative space, one unaccounted for in the foreground that only slowly calls attention to itself when at the conclusion of each act a single figure, partially seen in silhouette, applauds the performance, making us aware

24 Barrier, *Hollywood Cartoons*, p. 17.

of what had seemed to be just an empty area of the foreground. That glimpsed figure effectively stands in for both the film audience and the tramp, whose 'queer dreams' we suppose to be the source of all of these strange performances. Reduced to a shadowy presence, this singular audience not only responds appreciatively but effectively frames the unusual action, putting the apparently giant-sized bugs in a traditional space demarcated by backdrops and proscenium arch and organized by the vanishing point implicit in his gaze. This familiar situation of performance and appreciation seems to render the nightmare, despite its strangeness, harmless and conventional, even amusing. And the movement of the performers only underscores this impression, as the dancing daddy longlegs, bicycling cockroach, and tumbling bugs consistently move in a left-to-right and right-to-left fashion, while the butterfly and beetle fly around in circles, thereby reassuring us that this is a regular, if also carefully constructed, space, arranged for that viewer's perspective and, more importantly, that these uncanny effects are safely contained within its conventionality.

However, in a surprising conclusion this space – not to mention the performers – reveals another dimension. A spider emerges from above this artificial realm, reaches across the proscenium arch, grabs the silhouetted audience figure from the foreground and swallows him. It is a most unsettling end, not just because of that surprising and horrific attack which is precisely what we should have expected from such dreams, but also because of the way it assaults (or torpedoes) that conventional sense of space, pulling in the audience as if it were enacting another version of that move noted at the conclusion of *Gertie*. This unnerving finale reminds us of what *real* space, in contrast to the neatly arranged arena of stage and performance, is actually like. It is warped or phobic, filled with our darkest anxieties, while our conventional sense of space is rather that which we carefully construct – with frames, vanishing points and a carefully controlled perspective – as a kind of distraction, or protection, from the reality of life.

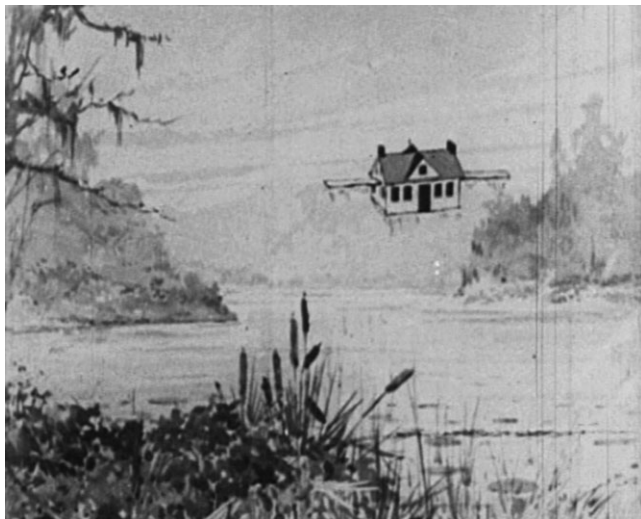
If the conclusion to *Bug Vaudeville* seems a bit like a nasty joke – one in keeping with the 'queer dreams' motif established at the film's start – it is also one that follows a pattern in McCay's work, of spaces that become laden with surprise, even menace. The 'playful' Gertie, after all, saunters from background to foreground to greet the audience, but almost immediately grabs for the only substantial object in the foreground, and nearest the audience, a tree, which she then easily plucks and swallows. And when another character, Jumbo the elephant, appears from offscreen and threatens to upstage her, Gertie soon picks him up and flings him into the deep background, demonstrating her power over this cartoon space. There is at least a hint in each of these actions that this primitive force could reach further into the foreground, even *offscreen*, to violate our space, undermine our carefully constructed world, were she not controlled by the ultimate master of these spaces, the animator McCay.

Bug Vaudeville
(Winsor McCay, 1921)



A slightly later effort, *The Flying House*, further develops this assault on conventional space, while more pointedly linking it to the sort of questioning of the cultural and social status quo usually associated with the avant garde. Once again framed by the dream mechanism which McCay favoured, a woman notes to her husband that she is afraid the Rarebit she had for dinner might produce a nightmare, and a subsequent title card, announcing 'The Dream', quickly supports that fear. Yet the images that immediately follow prove quite conventional and simply demonstrate some of the clean and finely detailed drawing for which McCay was well known: realistically rendered domestic images of their bedroom, a hallway, a staircase and the attic. Save for their strange emptiness, these domestic spaces hardly seem the stuff of dreams.

The Flying House
(Winsor McCay, 1922)



However, in the attic room the film begins to open onto a kind of surrealist dimension, and one that initiates its own assault on both the everyday world and its conventional space. For there we see the woman's husband tending a massive engine that fills the room; we later see him hoisting up a huge propeller and attaching it to a shaft that extends outside, apparently making their house ready for flight. These strange preparations, we learn, are his reaction to a letter from their unseen landlord, George A. Profiteer, who has announced that he is going to dispossess (or torpedo) them for a lack of payment. Rather than lose their home, the husband announces his rather unconventional response, that they will simply 'steal the house', as a title card puts it. That theft begins with a long-shot of the now propeller-equipped house, shows the house slowly breaking free from its foundations, and ends with the house flying towards the camera and then up and out of the frame, in the fashion of the Lumieres' train and of McCay astride Gertie.

As it violates the spatial constraints of the frame, as well as the laws of gravity and probability, the flying house leaves behind an almost empty space on which the camera then lingers. There is, of course, a multiply subversive effect within that now empty space, for it primarily represents a strike at the very core of property rights and the capitalist system, denoting the theft from Mr Profiteer. Additionally, that emptiness suggests the fears of loss and dispossession, the anxieties that drive this seemingly most conventional couple, and it hints at a repressed revolutionary spirit lurking even within the traditional domestic world. Finally, there is a phenomenological insistence here, as that vacated space underscores how easily this world might become warped, its spaces transformed, its solidity revealed as just another illusion fostered by the conventions of everyday life.

In detailing their subsequent adventures in that flying house, the rest of the film swerves into another sort of nightmare, one whose power draws less from the ideological than from the phenomenological implications of that emptiness. For the narrative then becomes a terrifying story of placelessness – and an interesting interpretation of the Freudian *unheimlich* – as the couple determine to 'fly around till we find a place where' the landlord 'will *never* find us' or their stolen house. The places to which they resort, however, all seem pointedly insubstantial and inhospitable, in stark contrast to their former home site: a swamp, atop a factory, on the ocean, even on the moon, where they are quickly chased off by a giant man in the moon wielding a flyswatter. And to underline that contrast, McCay depicts them looking wistfully at the conventional spaces below, neat squares and rectangular plots of land, criss-crossed by roads and rivers – the constructed space that seems appropriate to the domestic world. One implication, of course, is that there might not be anywhere in the modern world free of landlords, no space beyond that which has been culturally constructed and apportioned. Yet the wife's fearful recognition that they might become simply 'lost in the sky' voices a darker corollary, a fear that once we enter that emptiness we might not

be able to regain a secure place in this world. Her anxiety is precisely that bound up in both Vidler's sense of 'phobic space' and in Virilio's notion of a 'lost dimension'. However, the fact that the house eventually runs out of gas and is then struck by a rocket fired from an experimental gun brings a more practical end to this dream, or nightmare, of flight and escape. In falling from the sky to land, or awaken, in their bed, the starting point of the narrative, where the wife realizes 'I was dreaming', *The Flying House* resolves these multiple anxieties for us. Relieved and returned to their realistically drawn domestic space, the couple reminds us of how we remain bound to this world and to its cultural constructions, even if we become aware, or dream, of other possibilities, an open space of motion and change that, under life's pressures, powerfully beckons. It is a note comically struck earlier in the flight when the husband accidentally knocks over a water tank with the house and his wife observes 'they will make you pay for that', a quip he simply ignores.

Yet that open space in which the couple can, for a brief time, escape any payment, suggests a further dimension of the narrative, particularly in the way it here signals a stylistic shift. For it also represents the animator's own free space – the realm in which McCay can imaginatively play, can 'warp' space as he sees fit – as the film underscores when, during the house's flight into space, a title card injects a self-conscious note, advising us to admire the 'remarkable piece of animation which follows'. While we are assured that these images of the earth, moon and 'the beautiful constellation Orion' have all been 'drawn true to astronomical calculation', the rapid changes in perspective and the sudden appearance of an unlikely-looking man in the moon, as well as the outlandish shift in scale that this giant figure introduces, quickly blast away any notion of scientific concern and accuracy. In its place, and in an example of what Crafton has described as McCay's 'remarkable reflexiveness',²⁵ the film asserts the animator's freedom to explore and develop a sense of space for comic effect and as social satire. The extra, malleable space of the cartoon, the space that reminds us of what can and cannot be bound within the conventionally constructed world – or the typical film frame – is that which the very act of animation, the movement via pen or pencil from outside the frame to within, most fundamentally reveals and attests to.

In trying to gauge the sort of allusive use of space that marks McCay's films, I have followed Wells's lead in his discussion of the cultural power of early animation. He suggests that in the early modern era the animated film 'was the language of presence and absence'.²⁶ Yet that description, as accurate as it is, needs to be extended and read in the context of more than just the ideological, for it can point us in the direction of both the raw material of animation, of space itself, and of the role of the animator as himself a figure of 'presence and absence.' In McCay's films, *constructed space*, the space of culture, the space of presence, is continually foregrounded and interrogated in order to reveal not just the constructions of the social world but also its own corollary, the *warped*

25 Crafton, *Before Mickey*, p. 129.

26 Wells, *Animation and America*, p. 43.

space of experience, the subversive space of the imagination, the space of absence. If the latter typically emerges or discloses itself in the space of a dream – or the nightmare of war, as we see in *The Sinking of the Lusitania* – it intimates the difficulty of negotiating between these two sorts of space, and even the degree to which the latter was seen as repressed by the power of the former – a point that would repeatedly be made by the avant-garde art of the era.

Key to this spatial negotiation is the animator himself, in this instance McCay, whose presence, as I have suggested, can be felt even when he does not, as showman, pointedly step into the frame. For his presence is repeatedly measured out in the negative or warped spaces of his films, in every instance when he injects a note of surprise that suddenly apprises the audience of the animator's hand, precisely because of the way in which the images undermine a conventionally constructed space and, in the best modernist tradition, hint at an alternative. In this context we might briefly consider McCay's film *The Pet* (1921), with its narrative about a couple's adoption of a strange creature that they soon discover has a prodigious appetite, one that prompts it to eat practically everything it encounters – a bowl of milk, but also the cat, the couple's breakfast, including their place settings and coffee urn, the coal pile, various house furnishings, a barrel of rat poison, trees, a car, a trolley, various buildings, planes and even a dirigible – all the while growing ever larger and becoming a bigger menace. This unknown, unidentified and rather vaguely drawn species simply gouges ever greater holes in the detailed and conventional landscape McCay has drawn, and in a highly ironic way, I would suggest, points towards the work of the artist, as the figure who both creates and erases, always suggesting other possibilities, always dueling with that empty space. It is also clearly a figure (both 'pet' and artist) freighted with anxiety because of its very capacity for opening up these holes, for threatening our conventional sense of space, for challenging our world view. We might even think of it as the very spectre of modernism, stalking through the animated world, reminding us of how pliable cinematic space is and how similarly malleable the real world might also prove to be. Creating that vision seems to have been McCay's own 'pet' project, after all, and perhaps his key legacy to the world of animation.

The politics of *Ostalgie*: post-socialist nostalgia in recent German film

ANTHONY ENNS

The word *Ostalgie* – a combination of the German words for ‘nostalgia’ and ‘east’ – has emerged in Germany over the last few years to describe a new and widespread cultural fascination with the former German Democratic Republic. Critics often dismiss or simply overlook the significance of *Ostalgie* due to the fact that this term is normally associated with popular culture and ludicrous products such as ‘The DDR in a box’, a novelty item that includes mundane souvenirs from the former GDR such as worthless currency or plastic egg cups, and sells for roughly twenty euros. Travel agencies have also begun to offer *Ostalgie* tours, and an *Ostalgie* theme park has been proposed for the Berlin suburb of Köpenick. Instead of representing a renewed interest in, or even a mournful sympathy for, socialism, *Ostalgie* more often appears to be nothing more than a passing fad or a means of commercializing and commodifying the last remnants of an anticapitalist regime.

Thomas Elsaesser points out that the *Ostalgie* phenomenon is also frequently associated with television, which shows how the former GDR has become a ‘media construction’ following the dissolution of the country:

It is also to television that one has to turn if one wants to know what has happened to the ex-GDR and its cinema. At first glance it looks as if it has disappeared without much of a trace. . . . But in another sense it is perhaps precisely the black hole into which the representations and representatives of the GDR have disappeared that obliges one to take a

1 Thomas Elsaesser, *The BFI Companion to German Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1999), p. 14.

2 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 21.

3 Linda Hutcheon, 'Irony, nostalgia, and the postmodern', in Raymond Vervliet and Annemarie Estor (eds), *Methods for the Study of Literature as Cultural Memory* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 195.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

somewhat different approach to the whole issue of German cinema/national cinema. . . . If ex-DEFA directors have found a livelihood on television, they have also inherited a task: to provide a kind of 'shelter' for their audiences' own sense of difference (from the West Germans). Which is why it is possible to speak of a new cultural artifact in the making: the former GDR as a 'nostalgic' media construction. The regional TV channels set up in the so-called *Neue Bundesländer* to present the ex-GDR citizens to themselves, often via in-jokes and self-mockery, are helping to preserve the memory of certain gestures and familiar objects, habits and locations, brand-names and household goods from Communist times. As social and psychic dislocation continues after nearly a decade of unification, the need for these constructions appears to become greater rather than to diminish.¹

The close connection between the emergence of *Ostalgie* and the rise of new television programming in the former GDR is perhaps one of the primary reasons why this phenomenon has not been taken seriously. When Katarina Witt became the host of RTL's *The DDR Show*, for example, her appearance in a young pioneers' uniform (the youth division of the socialist party) confirmed the show as an apolitical celebration of the innocent face of the GDR. Rather than offering a serious political critique of the ways in which the GDR has been historicized, in other words, these programmes simply seem to revel in communist kitsch.

Because it is most often associated with popular culture and commercial products, *Ostalgie* would appear to provide a perfect illustration of what critics such as Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon have described as nostalgia's inherent failure to engage with history. Jameson argues, for example, that nostalgia represents 'an elaborate symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way'.² Hutcheon also suggests that nostalgia prevents people from engaging with history because it idealizes the past:

Nostalgia, in fact, may depend precisely on the *irrecoverable* nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia's power. . . . This is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire.³

Hutcheon thus concludes that 'nostalgia is less about the past than about the present' because 'the ideal that is not being lived now is projected into the past'.⁴ Although Hutcheon's argument ultimately suggests that irony might provide the intellectual distance 'necessary for reflective thought about the present as well as the past',⁵ Jameson and Hutcheon both condemn nostalgia itself as essentially regressive and naive, as a failure to engage with the actual, lived experience of history. *Ostalgie*

could similarly be interpreted as a sentimental whitewashing of the harsh realities of living under a totalitarian regime or, following Jameson, it may represent nothing more than Germany's inability to 'identify its own present'.

What these critics fail to acknowledge, however, is that despite the fact that nostalgia does not provide any critical distance from the past, it still retains the potential to foster a critical distance from the present. Indeed, this argument is already implicit in Hutcheon's own characterization of nostalgia as the projection of an idealized past that reveals a profound disappointment with the present:

Simultaneously distancing and proximating, nostalgia exiles us from the present as it brings the imagined past near. The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed . . . in conjunction with the present – which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational. Nostalgic distancing sanitizes as it selects, making the past feel complete, stable, coherent, safe . . . in other words, making it so very unlike the present. The aesthetics of nostalgia might, therefore, be less a matter of simple memory than of complex projection; the invocation of a partial, idealized history merges with a dissatisfaction with the present.⁶

At the same time that nostalgia brings 'the imagined past near', therefore, it also 'exiles us from the present', thus creating the kind of critical distance necessary to reflect on current conditions. It is this critique of the present, according to Hutcheon, that turns nostalgia into a force for imagining new social possibilities, as 'nostalgic and utopian impulses share a common rejection of the here and now'.⁷

Hutcheon's argument echoes the work of several other critics and theorists, such as James G. Hart, who similarly claims that nostalgia represents 'an imaginative re-constitution of the past',⁸ in which 'the hopes of the past as well as those of the actual present find a form of realization'.⁹ Like Hutcheon, Hart also concludes that the nostalgic impulse 'presupposes a hope with respect to the present future',¹⁰ and it is 'Precisely because the nostalgic world is the fulfillment of our present hopes' that 'we return and undergo its unique suffering'.¹¹ In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym similarly describes the potential threat that nostalgia poses to critical thinking:

It is the promise to rebuild the ideal home that lies at the core of many powerful ideologies today, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding. The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one. In extreme cases it can create a phantom homeland, for the sake of which one is ready to die or kill. Unreflected nostalgia breeds monsters.¹²

Yet Bohm also describes an alternative type of nostalgia called 'reflective nostalgia', which 'reveals that longing and critical thinking

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p. 204.

8 James G. Hart, 'Toward a phenomenology of nostalgia', *Man and World*, vol. 6, no. 4 (1973), p. 402.

9 Ibid., p. 404.

10 Ibid., p. 410.

11 Ibid., p. 408.

12 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2001), p. xvi.

13 Ibid., pp. 49–50.

14 Ibid., p. 55.

15 Elsaesser, *The BFI Companion to German Cinema*, p. 14.

16 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 54.

17 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 296.

18 Andrew Higson, 'Re-presenting the national past: nostalgia and pastiche in the heritage film', in Lester Friedman (ed.), *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 109.

are not opposed to one another, as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment or critical reflection'.¹³ Boym also argues that 'reflective nostalgia . . . has some connection to the loss of collective frameworks of memory', and it is thus 'a form of deep mourning that performs a labor of grief both through pondering pain and through play that points to the future'.¹⁴ Unlike 'restorative' or 'regressive' nostalgia, in other words, 'reflective nostalgia' stresses the importance of critical thinking and is fundamentally oriented towards the future.

Boym's concept of 'reflective nostalgia' provides an ideal description of East German *Ostalgie*. Despite its association with communist kitsch, this phenomenon also represents a form of mourning for what has been lost in the past and an implicit desire for political change in the present. In Elsaesser's words, *Ostalgie* represents a genuine response to the 'social and psychic dislocation' experienced by many East Germans,¹⁵ and Boym even discusses the struggles of East Germans to preserve their traffic lights, or *Ampelmännchen*, as a primary example of 'reflective nostalgia'. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the government of the newly unified city attempted to replace these lights with new, western-style traffic lights. Although these lights possessed little to no significance prior to reunification, they have since become the single most recognizable icon of GDR culture: 'In exile or in historic transition, the signposts from the former homeland themselves acquire emotional significance. . . . Nobody paid much attention to Ampelmann before, but once he vanished from the street signs, he suddenly became a beloved of the whole nation.'¹⁶ While such icons are often commodified in the form of kitsch (there are even stores in the former GDR that exclusively sell *Ampelmännchen* clothing and accessories), they continue to represent a very real need among a large segment of the German population to keep the history of the GDR alive. Rather than dehistoricizing and depoliticizing the GDR's past, therefore, the *Ostalgie* phenomenon seems to employ nostalgia more often as a critical tool to promote and enable an active engagement with the present.

Contemporary debates concerning the nature and function of nostalgia often focus on filmic representations. Jameson's argument, for example, was largely based on his critique of 'nostalgia films', which represent the past as a chain of empty stereotypes. According to Jameson, these 'films can be read as dual symptoms: they show a collective unconscious in the process of trying to identify its own present at the same time that they illuminate the failure of this attempt, which seems to reduce itself to the recombination of various stereotypes of the past'.¹⁷ This claim was highly influential among critics of the British 'heritage' films in the 1990s, as these films also seemed to represent a false sense of national identity based on stereotypes of the past. Andrew Higson argues, for example, that these films display the past 'as visually spectacular pastiche, inviting a nostalgic gaze that resists the ironies and social critiques so often suggested narratively by these films'.¹⁸ While Higson admits that 'the nostalgic perspective always involves a dialogue

19 Ibid., p. 118.

20 Ibid., p. 119.

21 Claire Monk, 'The British "heritage film" and its critics', *Critical Survey*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1995), p. 122.

22 Pam Cook, 'Neither here nor there: national identity and Gainsborough costume drama', in Andrew Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1996), p. 65.

23 Andrew Higson, 'The heritage film and British cinema', in Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1996), pp. 238–9.

24 Vera Dika, *Recycled Culture in Contemporary Art and Film: the Uses of Nostalgia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 94.

25 Amelia DeFalco, 'A double-edged longing: nostalgia, melodrama, and Todd Haynes's *Far From Heaven*', *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies*, no. 5 (2004), p. 27.

between the imagined past and a vision of the present',¹⁹ he dismisses the possibility that these films might be capable of social commentary because 'The strength of the pastiche in effect imprisons the qualities of the past, holding them in place as something to be gazed at from a reverential distance, and refusing the possibility of a dialogue or confrontation with the present'.²⁰ These films were also championed, however, precisely because they raised important political issues concerning class, gender and sexuality. Claire Monk argues, for example, that these films are 'spaces in which identities (whether those of characters and nations within the film or the spectators viewing it) are shifting, fluid and heterogeneous',²¹ and Pam Cook argues that the popularity of costume romances in general 'implies that the formation of class, gender and nation should be perceived in terms of a constant process of oscillation between identities rather than the achievement of coherence, unity and settlement'.²² Higson himself later revised his own argument by adding that

several of the bourgeois heritage films of the 1980s and 1990s can be read as liberal-humanist critiques of the Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite present. Not flights from the present, but a return to a version of the past in order to comment on the present, to contrast the individualist and materialist values of Thatcherism with the values of the liberal consensus, making connections across social boundaries of class, gender, sexuality, nationality, etc.²³

Subsequent critics have similarly begun to revisit American nostalgia films as potential sites of resistance. Vera Dika argues, for example, that *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973) may appear to be nothing more than a nostalgic fantasy of what life was like in the 1960s, but it actually employs obvious stereotypes in order 'to reference the effects of the Vietnam War on a generation, with the enforced gaiety of the film set against this historical loss'.²⁴ Amelia DeFalco similarly points out that the 'self-conscious simulacral qualities' of *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002) 'eschew representations of verisimilitude and disperse textuality, casting doubt on any possibility of "real" history outside the film world', and the film thus presents 'a seemingly contradictory nostalgia, a double-edged longing that realizes and embraces the illusion of its own object'.²⁵

This essay will employ a similar approach by arguing that recent German *Ostalgie* films show how even a seemingly pure, naive nostalgia might also function as a valuable device for critiquing the present. If the GDR has indeed become a 'media construction', as Elsaesser claims, then its representation in contemporary films can be seen as a privileged site where the legacy of the former country is actively contested. Although these films are not so much composed of a pastiche of filmic stereotypes or genres, they remain very similar to the British 'heritage' films in that they present an impossibly nostalgic image of a national identity that perhaps never truly existed, what Boym calls a 'phantom

homeland'. Instead of interpreting these nostalgic representations as politically regressive and conservative, however, I will argue that these films also incorporate a form of 'reflexive' or 'critical' nostalgia by addressing and critiquing cultural stereotypes associated with the history of the GDR and East Germans more generally, and they thus offer a valid criticism of contemporary attitudes towards the GDR and its often neglected socialist past. Rather than interpreting these films as evidence of a widespread failure among contemporary German filmmakers to identify and understand their own present moment, in other words, I will argue for a more productive reading of these films as a potential critique of the socioeconomic-political situation in Germany today. It is certainly more than coincidental, for example, that the *Ostalgie* phenomenon has emerged at a time when Germany is experiencing an economic crisis that has resulted in record-breaking unemployment rates and massive cuts in healthcare and education. This crisis is perhaps partly due to the tremendous cost of revitalizing the economy of the former GDR, yet in recent years the economic disparity between the east and the west has only increased. Seen within this context, *Ostalgie* becomes nothing less than a reexamination – sometimes playful, sometimes serious – of the utopian hopes and expectations surrounding German reunification, as well as their subsequent failure and the resulting disillusionment. The nostalgia for the east expressed in recent German films thus implies the moral bankruptcy of a capitalist system that has failed adequately to address current economic and cultural challenges, and it often reflects a more widespread desire to reevaluate the current state of a country that is still in flux more than fifteen years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The first film to depict life in the GDR in a nostalgic way was *Sonnenallee/Sun Alley* (Leander Haußmann, 1999), which was based on Thomas Brussig's novel *Am Ende der Sonnenallee* (1999). Set in East Berlin in the 1970s, the film tells the story of seventeen-year-old Micha (played by Alexander Scheer), a teenager with two driving obsessions: his passion for rock and roll and his crush on a girl named Miriam. Both of these interests entail considerable challenges. The music he covets is banned in the GDR, forcing Micha and his friends to discover creative ways of purchasing illegal records by the Beatles, Rolling Stones, T. Rex, and so on. Miriam remains similarly out of reach, and her relationship with a cocky Casanova from West Berlin is a painful reminder to Micha that he is way out of her league. Haußmann purposefully constructs this film as a universal tale of adolescent growing pains, not unlike *American Graffiti*. Micha eventually overcomes his teen angst and wins Miriam after she snubs her glamorous, wealthy western boyfriend. Micha's neighbours, who include Stasi informers, black marketeers, party administrators, young pioneers and rebellious youth, are also able to overcome their personal and political differences. By the end of the film the entire neighbourhood is miraculously unified through the power of rock and roll, and the climactic scene shows them dancing together in the

street, their movements perfectly choreographed to the pop hit The Letter.

Rather than providing an accurate depiction of life in the GDR, therefore, this light-hearted story represents a pointed attempt to characterize the former GDR in a sunnier fashion. In other words, this is not the way the GDR really was, but rather the way it has been transformed through the narrator's own nostalgic memories of youth. As Immanuel Kant argues in *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (1798), nostalgia does not represent the desire to return to the place where a person spent his childhood, but rather represents the desire to recapture childhood itself.²⁶ This is clearly emphasized in *Sonnenallee* by the voiceover at the end of the film, presented by the now presumably middle-aged Micha, who characterizes this time, long ago, as the best of his life because 'I was young and in love'. This framing device reminds the audience that Micha's story is being told from the perspective of the present, and the film's levity is clearly licensed by the fact that the political system it describes no longer exists and is thus no longer in need of critique. This is certainly a risky strategy, and it would indeed be easy to accuse the film of promoting a kind of historical amnesia, of failing to make the audience more politically aware by ignoring the harsh realities of life in the GDR. For example, Haußmann's humorous approach deflects the seriousness of Micha's mother's attempts to abandon her family and escape to the west – a very serious issue faced by many East Germans. The problem of smuggling is similarly treated in a comical manner by depicting the regime's control as completely innocuous and ineffectual. For example, Micha's eccentric uncle from West Berlin regularly smuggles western products across the border, such as pantyhose and underwear, yet he appears to be engaged in such illegal activity simply for the thrill of getting away with it. And when Micha's forbidden recording of Wonderland's song Moscow is confiscated, it merely serves to highlight the incompetence of the police, who mistake the song for an authentic Soviet release. The quirky neighbourhood guard (played by Detlev Buck) endures a constant, comical dance of being promoted and demoted in rank from 'Herr Meister' to 'Herr Obermeister', thus mocking the title-obsessed and multi-tiered bureaucracy of the GDR. All of these examples clearly illustrate the director's own assertion that the private moments of peoples' lives are far more important than the political moments they experience.²⁷

Several reviewers criticized the film for precisely this reason, arguing that *Sonnenallee* presented life behind the wall as a virtual 'petting zoo', and that the young protagonists were not in touch with the realities of everyday life in the GDR.²⁸ It was this reality that Brussig so effectively exposed and ridiculed in his novel *Helden wie wir* (1995), which tells the story of a young man growing up in the GDR who becomes a model citizen by joining the young pioneers, spying on his neighbours and eventually joining the Stasi. Like *Sonnenallee*, this novel similarly employs absurdist humour, yet its criticism of the state could not be more

26 Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, Volume I (Königsberg: Nicolovius, 1798), p. xxxii.

27 This comment is taken from an interview with the director featured on the German DVD release of *Herr Lehmann*.

28 Rayk Einax, 'Aufguss', frame 25, no. 5 (1999), p. 19.

29 Elke de Wit, 'The sunnier side of East Germany', *Central European Review*, vol. 2, no. 9 (2000). URL: http://www.ce-review.org/00/9/kinoeye9_dewit.html [accessed 27 September 2007].

overt; Brussig even describes the fall of the Berlin Wall as simply another example of the East German propensity to conform – a herd mentality that was instilled in them by the state itself. The levity of *Sonnenallee* seems to suggest that Brussig's second novel lacks the political dimension of *Helden wie wir*, or that its use of nostalgia essentially negates any underlying political message, yet other critics have argued that the very notion of representing life in the GDR as 'normal' is in itself political. As Elke de Wit points out, *Sonnenallee* 'pleads for recognition from West Germans that life for young East Germans was just as valid'.²⁹ Haußmann's personal background would seem to strengthen this argument. Since he was born in 1959 in the eastern city of Quedlinburg, the film also seems to be informed by his own firsthand experience as a teenager growing up in the GDR during the 1970s.

There is certainly some truth to the argument that even the mere depiction of everyday life in the GDR serves a political purpose, as such depictions are indeed quite rare and many East Germans increasingly feel that their experiences are being erased from Germany's collective cultural memory, yet such arguments often ignore or simply overlook more obvious political readings of the film. There is a marked satirical tone in the film, for example, which exposes and criticizes westerners' stereotypes of East Germans and of the former GDR as a whole. Haußmann is particularly drawn to this cut-off section of *Sonnenallee*, for instance, because it lay directly on the border between East and West Berlin, and westerners could observe the eastern section of *Sonnenallee* from observation platforms that were set up on the western side. This neighbourhood was thus constantly under the microscope of western surveillance, and there are several moments in the film when western tour groups come to gaze upon the street's supposedly unfortunate inhabitants. Prompted by jeers from West German adolescents, Micha and his friends at one point angrily play to their stereotypes by threatening the onlookers with violent words and gestures. Micha and his friends also exaggerate the presumed clichés held by western visitors when they run after a tour bus with pleading, outstretched arms. One of the naive western tourists exclaims: 'Look at those boys. They're just like those people we saw in Africa.' 'It's so sad', responds another. This satirical commentary, as well as the sharp contrast between *Sonnenallee* and earlier depictions of life in the GDR, suggests that the roots of *Ostalgie* are not as frivolous or kitschy as they might at first appear.

The film also illustrates aspects of life in the former GDR that make this country actually appear better than contemporary Germany, which further suggests that the film's nostalgia might represent something more complex and potentially more political than Micha's simple recollections of youth. Throughout the narrative Micha not only describes his own experiences but also the GDR itself as a thriving environment where employment rates were high and everyone could afford housing and food. In the closing shot of the film, the camera tracks down the empty

30 Susanne Rost, 'Straße ohne Sonne', *Berliner Zeitung*, 30 April 2003, p. 24.

street and crosses the former border between East and West Berlin, which is now gone. By shifting from colour to black-and-white and eliminating all signs of life, this shot clearly suggests that the sun has finally set on Sonnenallee, and the uncertain future that lies ahead will be nothing more than a bleak and lonely night. This reference to reunification does not carry with it the promise of a better tomorrow, therefore, but rather the film's retrospective look at life in the GDR is clearly informed by the subsequent failure of reunification to meet the nation's hopes and expectations. This failure points to a deeper void in the present, and the reality is that life on Sonnenallee is far bleaker today than it was prior to reunification. As Susanne Rost points out, unemployment and crime have only increased in this part of the city since the fall of the Berlin Wall.³⁰

Unlike Haußmann's film, which implicitly criticizes the present by explicitly treating the past in a nostalgic way, films like *Berlin is in Germany* (Hannes Stöhr, 2001) and *Goodbye, Lenin!* (Wolfgang Becker, 2003) address similar issues by examining the dramatic changes that have taken place in Berlin since reunification and the ways in which the past has irrevocably altered present socio-political conditions. *Berlin is in Germany* tells the story of Martin Schulz (played by Jörg Schüttauf), who is released from prison eleven years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It is revealed at the end of the film that his crime was actually an accident, and thus his imprisonment clearly illustrates the flaws of the GDR's legal system. His prison sentence also seems to function as a metaphor for the GDR itself, as the fall of the Wall effectively allowed easterners to be 'set free'. But the film's main focus is on Berlin and the radical changes that have occurred in that city over the course of the previous decade. Not only have massive construction projects changed the face of the city, but even the streets have been reorganized and renamed. The elimination of places like Stalinallee and Leninplatz, for example, provide obvious illustrations of the ways in which the history of the city has been rewritten to eliminate any trace of its socialist past, and the disorienting effect of these changes is emphasized when Martin applies for a taxi licence and realizes he can no longer navigate his own hometown. Martin is thus forced to study the layout of the new Berlin, but due to his criminal record he is ultimately sacked before he even has a chance to take his final examination. The film thus builds on the prison metaphor of the GDR by suggesting that former East Germans are like ex-cons who are now living in a society where they are treated as second-class citizens, often unable to find work in a free-market economy for which their training and education is considered substandard, even useless. The changes that have taken place in the country also parallel changes in Martin's own family, as his wife now has a new boyfriend and his son Rokko no longer recognizes him. Although these problems are all resolved by the end of the film, viewers are left to ponder the film's more disturbing social and political implications. The film's English title, for example, comes from one of Rokko's homework assignments, which

illustrates a shift in curriculum from Russian to English as the primary foreign language taught in the German public school system. This change is not only disorienting for Martin, as it crystallizes the new generation gap between parents and children, but also emphasizes the feeling that he is a foreigner in his own country. While Martin is happy to be out of prison and reunited with his family, the film ultimately suggests that the changes caused by reunification were far greater than anticipated and that they were not necessarily changes for the better, which resulted in the alienation and isolation of many easterners.

The notion that some easterners were disillusioned after reunification is also explored in *Goodbye, Lenin!*, which similarly employs a Rip van Winkle device to emphasize the sudden and overwhelming changes that took place in Berlin following the fall of the Wall. The film begins just prior to this moment, as a loyal GDR citizen named Christiane Kerne (played by Katrin Sass) witnesses her son Alex (played by Daniel Brühl) being beaten by East German police during a demonstration, after which she falls into a coma. She wakes up eight months later, but the doctor informs her son that the slightest shock may kill her. Knowing that his mother would indeed be horribly shocked to discover that the GDR has collapsed, Alex attempts to prevent his mother from learning the truth, and he resurrects the family's old GDR furniture in order to transform his mother's bedroom back to the way it was prior to reunification. As most of the food products manufactured in the GDR are no longer available, Alex also searches for old containers, which he then fills with newly imported foods. This search provides some of the most humorous moments in the film – moments that may be lost on foreign audiences – as the most mundane aspects of daily life in the GDR suddenly take on tremendous significance. In this way, it could be argued that *Goodbye, Lenin!* reflects and even contributes to the current fascination for GDR popular culture, as it reminds people about products like Mocca Fix Gold coffee and Spreewald pickles. Because the fall of the Wall also resulted in an enormous shift in fashion, as easterners quickly discarded their old clothes in favour of new western imports, Alex must search for old clothing for his family to wear. This also becomes a source of humour, as the family ends up modelling some of the most hysterically appalling outfits from the former GDR. Although the film takes place only eight months after reunification, the outdated fashion of these clothes seems to recall a much more distant past. Alex's sister Ariane (played by Maria Simon) expresses disbelief that she ever wore such clothing, even though her current clothes would not have been available in the GDR less than a year earlier. The film thus repeatedly illustrates the differences between east and west as a confrontation between the former GDR and Germany's post-reunification present, and Alex becomes a kind of archeologist sifting through the detritus of a vanished culture and transforming his family home into a kind of time capsule or living museum.

In order to create the illusion that the GDR is still functioning as normal, Alex hires local children to wear young pioneer uniforms and sing traditional songs for his mother, who used to conduct a young pioneer choir. Because the current television news would be too shocking for his mother, Alex also produces his own fake news broadcasts with the help of his friend Denis (played by Florian Lukas). When an advertisement for Coca-Cola goes up directly outside his mother's window, Alex even accommodates this potentially shocking change by faking a news report that claims Coca-Cola was actually invented in the GDR. Alex's broadcasts thus allow him to reinvent the country's history, and as the film goes on this reinvention increasingly diverges from reality. For example, after Christiane unexpectedly leaves the confines of her controlled environment and takes a walk outside, during which she witnesses a large number of westerners living in her neighbourhood, Alex creates another news story, claiming that Erich Honecker has agreed to take in West German refugees disillusioned with capitalism. Through this conscious play of simulation and representation, Alex's idealized depiction of life in the former GDR gradually becomes completely removed from actual, lived reality, and Alex himself begins to realize that he is not recreating the GDR as it was, but rather as he would have liked it to be. By editing the history of the GDR, in other words, Alex is effectively editing his own country's cultural memory, and the sanitized version of the GDR that finally emerges on his television screen represents a pure product of his own nostalgia. At the end of the film, he even reedits the footage of the fall of the Berlin Wall such that the collapse of the GDR represents the ultimate achievement of socialism rather than its last great failure.

By refusing to address the more serious and disturbing aspects of the GDR, however, Becker's film has been frequently criticized for its apparently apolitical stance. Anna Funder argues, for example, that the film obscures the fact that the GDR was a totalitarian regime employing the most sinister methods of surveillance to control and manipulate its citizens.³¹ Becker justifies this oversight by focusing on the universal appeal of the film rather than its specific social and political context, claiming that the film can be 'totally separated from this specific past'.³² Becker also rejects the idea that this film has anything to do with *Ostalgie* because it is equally as popular in the west as in the east. Katrin Sass, a veteran of the East German DEFA film studio, also claims that 'it is not a film about the fall of the Wall. . . . It's about a mother and a son, a family. It's a story the audience should be able to relate to with or without the historical background'.³³ This interpretation has also been reinforced in the international press, whose reviewers often seem to be both unfamiliar with the film's historical background and oblivious to the *Ostalgie* phenomenon in general. In his review of *Goodbye, Lenin!* in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, for example, Roger Ebert writes: '*Goodbye, Lenin!* . . . never quite addresses the self-deception which causes Christiane to support the communist regime in the first place. Many people backed it through fear,

³¹ Anna Funder, *Review of Goodbye, Lenin!*, *Prospect*, vol. 89 (2003). URL: http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?search_term=anna+funder&id=5680 [accessed 27 September 2007].

³² Dina Iordanova, 'East of Eden', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 13, no. 8 (2003), p. 28.

³³ *Ibid.*

34 Roger Ebert, Review of *Goodbye, Lenin!*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, 26 March 2004. URL: <http://www.rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20040326/REVIEWS/403260304/1023> [accessed 27 September 2007].

35 Ibid.

ambition or prudence, but did anyone actually love it and believe in it? ... Imagine a film named *Goodbye, Hitler!* in which a loving son tries to protect his cherished mother from news of the fall of the Third Reich.’³⁴ Ebert’s inability to understand that there were indeed many aspects of life in the GDR that its citizens loved and believed in reveals a profound lack of attention to the film’s specific cultural context, yet he ultimately rescues the film from its allegedly misguided politics by stressing instead its exploration of universal themes concerning parent–child relationships: ‘The underlying poignancy in this comedy is perhaps psychological more than political. How many of us lie to our parents, pretending a world still exists that they believe in but we have long since moved away from?’³⁵

It is certainly understandable that the filmmakers would want to distance this film from the more gimmicky overtones of *Ostalgie*. The characterization of the film as the product of pure nostalgia could easily reduce it to nothing more than an empty stereotype of East German culture or leave it open to criticism for being politically irresponsible. By representing young pioneers, Stasi informers and bureaucrats as harmlessly comic and largely ineffectual members of a now defunct state apparatus, the film clearly runs the risk of transforming the former GDR into a safe commodity much like ‘The DDR in a box’. The reading of these films as simply family melodramas with universal appeal thus allows filmmakers and critics to dehistoricize, decontextualize and depoliticize the film, yet this strategy fails to address more complicated questions about the political function of nostalgia itself. For example, Alex’s recreation of the GDR does not simply represent a conservative restoration of the past, but rather it also represents an idealized version of that past. In other words, Alex is also explicitly reassessing the country’s guiding principles and questioning what the GDR could have been had it had the opportunity to be critiqued and improved. *Goodbye, Lenin!* thus clearly illustrates how *Ostalgie* also functions as a form of political engagement, as it integrates a critical or ‘reflective’ nostalgia with the utopian desire to imagine new social possibilities.

This can be most clearly seen in Alex’s fake news reports, which explicitly acknowledge the ways in which the former GDR has been transformed into a media construction. While the news effectively illustrates national identity as a composite of media representations, it simultaneously exposes the malleability of such representations, and the end result is a self-consciously nostalgic version of GDR history that is not actually true but nevertheless speaks to the problems and issues faced by East Germans after reunification. These news reports also provide a perfect example of what Boym calls ‘countermemory’, a phenomenon that emerged in Eastern Europe prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Boym describes it as ‘a prototype of a public sphere that already had emerged under the Communist regime’, in which an ‘alternative vision of the past, present and future ... was communicated through half words, jokes and doublespeak’.³⁶ This process involved ‘finding blemishes in

36 Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. 61.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid., p. 62.

the official narrative of history³⁷ as well as deconstructing the dominant political rhetoric. Countermemory is 'not merely a collection of alternative facts and texts but also an alternative way of reading by using ambiguity, irony, doublespeak, private intonation that challenged the official bureaucratic and political discourse'.³⁸ Countermemory thus recognizes that history itself consists of nothing more than representations, and it provides people with a humorous and light-hearted way of deconstructing official versions of national identity while simultaneously constructing alternative versions that are more closely connected to their own lived experiences. When Alex realizes that he is constructing an alternative version of GDR history that more closely matches his own personal sense of national identity, as well as that of his immediate community, his light-hearted and well-intentioned prank similarly becomes a countermemory that retains a far greater political significance. By restaging the circumstances surrounding the fall of the Berlin Wall, for example, Alex's final news broadcast clearly illustrates a desire to resurrect useful aspects of socialism that have since been buried under the weight of history.

The latest film that represents the GDR in a more positive light is *Kleinruppin Forever* (Carsten Fiebler, 2004), which takes place in 1985 and tells the story of twins who grew up on opposite sides of the Wall. Tim, who lives in the western city of Bremen, is an affluent tennis star on the verge of going pro and his twin brother Ronnie, who lives in the fictitious eastern city of Kleinruppin, is a poor factory worker dreaming in vain of one day studying architecture (both characters are played by Tobias Schenke). The two brothers finally meet when Tim's high school goes on a field trip to the GDR and Ronnie's curiosity about the west leads him forcefully to assume Tim's identity and return in his place. The rest of the film chronicles Tim's attempts to return home and his eventual realization that his new life in the east is more complete and meaningful than the empty life he led in the west. While Tim remains critical of the GDR's political and economic systems, the film describes this gradual conversion as the valuing of personal relationships over political allegiances, much like Haußmann's privileging of the personal over the political. While many of the negative aspects of life in the GDR are represented in this film, such as the Stasi agents who constantly spy on Tim and his family or the blatant corruption he witnesses at work, the film focuses more on the positive bonds Tim develops with his new community. Tim's father in the west, for example, is a cold, self-serving and insensitive businessman, who mocks Tim's tennis ambitions and urges him instead to join the family firm, yet Ronnie's father Erwin (played by Michael Gwisdek) is a kind, warm-hearted man, who quickly becomes the caring father Tim never had. Tim's girlfriends conform to the same model. While his girlfriend in the west is depicted as wealthy, superficial and unemotional, his new eastern girlfriend Jana (played by Anna Brüggemann) eventually teaches him the true meaning of love. These personal bonds also have political connotations, as they illustrate

the ways in which interpersonal relationships in the west were created through materialism and the acquisition of capital, while those in the east were strengthened through mutual struggle and interdependence. The importance of personal bonds that override professional and financial security is also the basis for Tim's ultimate decision to reject his tennis scholarship and stay in the GDR instead.

Like Haußmann, director Carsten Fiebler grew up in the former GDR, and he clearly set out to make a film that would inspire viewers to wish that they too could live in the GDR. His first film, *Die Datsche/Home Truths* (2002), was a far more brutal depiction of the hardships suffered by East Germans after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It tells the story of an eastern couple who are forced to give up their cabin in the country – their most prized possession – and are subsequently robbed during their last night there, in an allegorical representation of the theft of eastern culture following reunification. The fact that Fiebler's second film is far more light-hearted has encouraged reviewers like Jan Brachmann to conclude that 'according to Fiebler, the time for licking wounds has passed, and he strives instead to claim the right to view the east in a positive way'.³⁹ Brachmann also points out, however, that the story is told from a western perspective, which suggests that East German filmmakers are increasingly being deprived of their own voice: 'When a young director can only view the country in which he was born and raised in a partially loving way by adopting a western perspective, it is a sign of . . . dispossession'.⁴⁰ This argument certainly has merit, and the nostalgia in this film is tempered to some degree by the fact that it focuses primarily on Tim rather than Ronnie, yet Fiebler ultimately subverts this western perspective by repeatedly switching back and forth between the east and the west, thus providing a detailed analysis of the many differences between these two cultures. While the GDR functions as an object of critical scrutiny at the beginning of the film, for example, the same can also be said of West Germany at the end of the film, as its negative aspects are similarly exaggerated and contrasted with the GDR's socialist alternatives. This is particularly evident when Tim manages to escape from the GDR and return to his previous home. The presence of his twin brother Ronnie, who has since happily assimilated into Tim's former life, serves as a virtual mirror that allows Tim to see more clearly what he once was. The extremely gaudy and extravagant lifestyles of the westerners – the clothes, the swimming pools and the overabundance of fruity cocktails – now appear as strange and foreign to him as the GDR did when he first arrived. Perhaps the most radical aspect of the film is that this shift in perspective is so subtle and convincing: while Tim's character ostensibly represents an initial point of identification for western viewers, these same viewers are gradually led to identify with an eastern perspective, and by the end of the film they are even asked to view themselves as easterners view them.

Like many of the other films discussed in this paper, therefore, *Kleinruppin Forever* illustrates a direct confrontation between two

39 Jan Brachmann, 'Buddelt euch ein!', *Berliner Zeitung*, 9 September 2004, p. 30.

40 Ibid.

opposing ways of life, and it employs nostalgia as a critical tool for evaluating contemporary German society and identifying potentially positive aspects of life in the former GDR that seem to have disappeared since reunification. It seems that this strategy was designed to speak directly to a particular historical moment, as the release of this film coincided with the fifteenth anniversary of the fall of the Wall, an event that generated considerable public debate in Germany about the impact of reunification. This debate allowed many former East Germans to express their dissatisfaction with the western model that had been imposed upon them, which was seen as the solution for all of the GDR's problems but which has only increased the economic disparity between the east and the west. By allowing eastern voices to be heard and explicitly criticizing the effects of reunification, films like *Kleinruppin Forever* clearly employ nostalgia both as a form of mourning for what has been lost and as a means for effecting political change.

It remains unclear, however, whether such utopian hopes will ever be realized or even whether such films will continue to be made. The recent success of *Das Leben der Anderen*/*The Lives of Others* (Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck, 2006), for example, suggests that western audiences are far more interested in the darker aspects of the GDR. This film depicts the Stasi's surveillance of a fictional playwright named Georg Dreyman (played by Sebastian Koch). Not that Dreyman is a dissident, but the Cultural Minister Bruno Hempf (played by Thomas Thieme) is in love with Dreyman's girlfriend and is looking for an excuse to place him in prison. At the end of the film, shortly after the collapse of the GDR, Hempf meets Dreyman at the theatre and notes that Dreyman has not been able to write since the fall of the Wall. He concludes that the GDR was not such a bad country, as the suffering endured by artists and intellectuals also served as a source of inspiration by giving them an opponent to fight against: 'What is there to write about in this new Germany? Nothing to believe in, nothing to rebel against. Life was good in our little republic. Many realize that only now.' By allowing the villain of the film to be the only character who voices any nostalgia for the former GDR, and by making it clear that the reasons for his nostalgia are obviously contemptible, Donnersmarck's film clearly represents an overt critique of *Ostalgie* itself. Reviews of the film frequently address this subtext. Reinhard Mohr, for example, claims that '*Das Leben der Anderen* is the first German motion picture to seriously tackle the GDR without expressing nostalgia for Trabis or Spreewaldgurken',⁴¹ and Holger Lodahl similarly claims that 'after the GDR has been all dressed up and nostalgically represented in successful film comedies, *Das Leben der Anderen* finally shows the other side of the GDR. This film begins to fill the historical gap left behind by *Goodbye, Lenin!* and *Sonnenallee*.'⁴² Tobias Vetter nicely sums up this viewpoint by describing the film as 'an antidote to the *Ostalgie* overdose'.⁴³ Such reviews would seem to indicate that *Das Leben der Anderen* represents more than simply

41 Reinhard Mohr, 'Stasi ohne Spreewaldgurke', *Spiegel Online*, 15 March 2006. URL: <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/0,1518,406092,00.html> [accessed 27 September 2007].

42 Holger Lodahl, 'Das Leben der Anderen: Das nächste große Ding?', *kino-zeit*. URL: http://www.kino-zeit.de/filme/artikel/4463_das-leben-der-anderen.html [accessed 27 September 2007].

43 Tobias Vetter, 'Das Leben der Anderen', *filmrezension*, 21 March 2006. URL: http://www.filmrezension.de/frame.shtml?filme/das_leben_der_anderen.shtml [accessed 27 September 2007].

44 Evelyn Finger, 'Die Bekehrung', *Die Zeit*, 23 March 2006. URL: http://www.zeit.de/2006/13/Leben_der_anderen [accessed 27 September 2007].

45 This comment is taken from an interview with the director featured on the North American DVD release of *Das Leben der Anderen*.

another version of GDR history, but instead points to a more widespread cultural backlash against the *Ostalgie* phenomenon as a whole.

Evelyn Finger notes, however, that Donnersmarck's film is not a work of realism but rather a work of 'metaphorical hyperrealism' because it 'plays with our clichés [and] depicts images of late-socialist melancholy that seem to come straight from picture books: grey-brown offices, blue-grey interrogation rooms, artist apartments with creaking floorboards and worn out sofas'.⁴⁴ Donnersmarck conducted extensive research for the film, and he also cast several famous East German actors, such as Ulrich Mühe, who was previously under Stasi surveillance himself. He was therefore concerned that the story be as authentic as possible. However, in an interview conducted at the 2006 Toronto Film Festival, where the film received its North American premiere, Donnersmarck also discussed the colour scheme he employed in the film, which was designed to highlight and emphasize certain colours that people most often associate with the GDR. His goal was to capture the way the GDR exists in people's memory rather than the way it was in real life, yet he also added that this nostalgic memory of the GDR is more 'true' than the GDR itself:

We created a GDR that is in a way truer than the true thing. When Ulrich and I traveled through the former GDR and presented the film there before it was released, people would come up to us and say, 'Wow, it's incredible. It's exactly how it was, and you have so much managed to recreate that time.' And that's because in our memories things become stronger than they were and so if there was a dominance of certain colours, those other colours we almost forget about. And so in a way we've created a GDR that is truer than the real thing, that is realer than the actual GDR, and I hope more beautiful.⁴⁵

It would be wrong to conclude, therefore, that Donnersmarck's representation of the GDR is more real or authentic than the representations in *Ostalgie* films; rather, Donnersmarck's comments seem to complicate the very notion of 'truth' and 'authenticity' in relation to filmic representations. While Donnersmarck's film does not express a nostalgic vision of GDR culture, in other words, the power of its representations are similarly derived from its ability to appeal to both the memory and the imagination of viewers. The very basis of Donnersmarck's conclusion that films function as imaginative reconstructions of reality would thus seem to strengthen the notion of nostalgia as a potential tool for imagining new social possibilities: just as Donnersmarck's film presents a 'hyperreal' space, in which certain elements of the former GDR are emphasized and others remain forgotten or left out, nostalgic depictions of the GDR similarly exclude or reimagine the more negative aspects of the culture in order to highlight potentially positive social changes that might be introduced in the present. While Donnersmarck's film could be read as a reminder of the dangers of totalitarianism and the critical importance of privacy laws, for example, *Ostalgie* films might also be read as a warning about the

dangers of completely ignoring the more humane aspects of socialism. Debates about the *Ostalgie* phenomenon must therefore move beyond the simple question of whose representation of the GDR is more valid or authentic and try instead to accept a plurality of different versions that speak to the hopes and fears of all East Germans, both those who felt oppressed under the old regime and those who continue to feel disenfranchised today.

Africa's Lost Classics: introduction

LIZELLE BISSCHOFF and DAVID MURPHY

Accounts of African film history have often been extremely selective in their discussion of work from the 1960s and early 1970s, the first decade of sub-Saharan African cinema, which has meant that a range of important films from this early period have fallen into undeserved obscurity. Over the past two years we have been engaged in a project that turns the spotlight on some of these 'lost classics', and explores how a more sustained engagement with these works might allow us to develop more complex approaches to African film history.¹ The primary aim of the project is to bring these rare and little-known films from the 1960s – by both major and neglected African directors – to the attention of theorists and critics, as well as the general viewing public. The four 'lost classics' selected were screened as part of *Africa in Motion* (AiM), the first Edinburgh African film festival, in October 2006. The complete programme consisted of twenty-five films from all over the African continent (shorts, documentaries and feature films from the 1950s to the 2000s), and the Lost Classics programme played an important role in giving audiences a sense of the sheer variety of sub-Saharan African filmmaking right from its inception. Even for those relatively knowledgeable about African cinema, the Lost Classics programme revealed the aesthetic, intellectual and political richness of so much cinematic practice during the early period of sub-Saharan African filmmaking, a body of work that is simply glossed over in many overviews of the field.

From a theoretical perspective, the project seeks to promote the development of a more complex genealogy of African cinema, which has regularly been characterized as didactic, realist and primarily interested in the exploration of social and political issues, with the late, great Senegalese director, Ousmane Sembène (who died in June 2007) often

¹ In 2006, we were awarded funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) for a year-long project entitled 'Recovering lost African film classics: towards a more complex history of African cinema'. We would like to acknowledge the support of the AHRC in enabling us to develop our ideas for this current publication.

- 2 Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992); Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike, *Black African Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press, 1994).
- 3 The French government has long enjoyed a complex relationship with African cinema. It has fostered filmmaking in francophone Africa since the late 1950s but, in so doing, it has been accused by some of a neocolonial desire to maintain its sphere of influence through the cultural arena.
- 4 Key figures in the film world in Africa have long recognized the need to safeguard and make accessible the riches of the continent's film history. The biennial African film festival, FESPACO, held in Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, has for many years now featured retrospectives of 'classic' work alongside the screening of the latest releases. As June Givanni mentions in her contribution to this dossier, despite the creation of the Burkina Faso *Cinémathèque* to preserve Africa's film past, which was announced in the mid 1990s, its first catalogue had not been produced more than a decade later; such are the logistical problems of attempting to salvage Africa's cinematic past.
- 5 As far as we know, these films have never been screened to the general public in a cinema in Britain before. In the case of *Le Retour d'un aventurier* and *Concerto pour un exil*, screening rights had to be cleared directly with the filmmakers in Niger and Ivory Coast respectively; the screenings of Mambéty's films were arranged through his son, Teamour Mambéty, who has been looking after Mambéty's work since he died in 1998. The two screenings of the Lost Classics package during AiM 2006 were extremely well received by audiences and were, as was the rest of the festival, practically sold out. Production and distribution information about these films was

cited as an emblematic figure. The view of sub-Saharan African cinema as politically radical and largely realist in style has accompanied it since its beginnings and was clearly fostered by many directors themselves, not least through the fiery Algiers Charter that was produced by FEPACI, the federation of African filmmakers, in 1975. This view became entrenched as critical orthodoxy with the publication of two landmark historical surveys of African cinema in the 1990s: Manthia Diawara's *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (1992) and Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike's *Black African Cinema* (1994).² However, this perception of African cinema is, we would argue, both somewhat limited in its reading of work by the likes of Sembene (whose films were always far more complex than the social realist tag allowed), and also extremely partial in its choice of works deemed 'representative' of African filmmaking practice. After extended periods of research at the French government-sponsored *Cinémathèque Afrique* (founded by the Ministry for Co-operation) in Paris,³ combined with the growing commercial availability of a small number of films from the 1960s, we began to wonder what African film history might look like if we attempted to carve out a place within it for some of its 'lost classics'.⁴

The four 'classics' we selected were *Le Retour d'un aventurier/The Return of an Adventurer* (Moustapha Alassane, Niger/France, 1966), *Concerto pour un exil/Concerto for an Exile* (Désiré Ecaré, Ivory Coast/France, 1968), *Contras' City* (Djibril Diop Mambéty, Senegal/France, 1969) and *Badou Boy* (Djibril Diop Mambéty, Senegal/France, 1970).⁵ Alassane's film is an exuberant parody of the cowboy movie; Ecaré's is a moody and evocative exploration of African student life in the Latin Quarter; while Mambéty's maverick genius belongs in a category all of its own, his two playful, experimental, comedic films displaying the unique talents that would later mark him out as perhaps the most accomplished director ever to have emerged from sub-Saharan Africa.

We are aware that our designation of these four short or medium-length African films from this period as 'lost classics' might be seen by some as something of an overstatement. For starters, none of the four classics screened at AiM 2006 was genuinely 'lost', for they are all to be found in the archives of the *Cinémathèque Afrique*. Equally, short and medium-length films are rarely held in the same esteem as feature films (although, as will be argued below, African directors have often had to resort to shorter cinematic forms due to the severe financial constraints under which they are working). Moreover, a search for the 'lost classics' of the world's most under-represented cinema, whose established classics — for example, *Cairo Station* (Youssef Chahine, 1959), *Soleil O* (Med Hondo, 1969), *Touki Bouki* (Djibril Diop Mambéty, 1973), *Xala* (Ousmane Sembène, 1974), *Yeelen* (Souleymane Cissé, 1987) — are often unknown even to cinephile audiences, might seem a chimeric project at best. As Mark Cousins argues in his contribution to this dossier, canon formation is always an ambiguous process, which has the potential to stymie debate and to foster a certain aesthetic and even political

placed on the AiM website and it is our hope that through rescuing these films from their current neglect, we are helping to make these films more widely and easily available to film festival organisers and cinema programmers in the anglophone world.

conservatism. Consequently, our project acts as an interrogation of the consensus that appears to surround the development of sub-Saharan African filmmaking, and it seeks to oblige critics and film historians to find a place in their narratives for the styles and forms adopted by our selection of 'classics'.

The paradoxical term 'lost classics' reflects the ambiguous position occupied by such films: aesthetically and politically innovative, they are challenging works that deserve a wider audience and much greater scholarly attention but have been 'lost' due to a range of complex circumstances, not least of which has been the creation of a canon of African filmmaking for this period that focused almost exclusively on realist and explicitly political (often didactic) forms of filmmaking. An interventionist strategy is thus required to challenge the mode of intellectual and cultural canonization that produced this situation in the first place. Within African film criticism, it is necessary to challenge the outdated desire to shoehorn most work from the 1960s and 1970s into the narrow constraints of a politically radical but often aesthetically conservative filmmaking practice, against which one can contrast the supposedly apolitical but stylistically more dynamic work of the past two or three decades: this provides a neat chronological pattern into which to insert African cinema but it is an assertion that simply does not hold up under sustained scrutiny. In relation to film studies more generally, there is a pressing and ongoing need to expose scholars to a much wider range of African filmmaking practice, which goes beyond the elevation of one director per decade to the status of the 'representative' figure of African cinema: Aderrahmane Sissako currently occupies this representative role in the same way that Ousmane Sembène, Med Hondo and Souleymane Cissé did in previous decades. To reduce the filmmaking of an entire continent to the work of one director is, in many ways, to reduce the Other to a monolithic, knowable object, and it is part of a process that permits books on World Cinema to devote just one chapter to Africa (when Africa is deemed 'important' enough to warrant a chapter, which is not always the case) alongside multiple chapters on western national cinemas. Promoting the 'lost classics' of African cinema is, above all, a challenge to the reductive dimension of the process of canon formation.

Our four 'classics' are not designed to represent a coherent counter-canon to be set in opposition to the work of Sembène, Hondo or other radical directors of the era; in fact, our choice of films was partially constrained by questions of availability — even for those films we did track down, we were often dealing with one of the few remaining prints in existence (often in poor condition), and in the case of *Le Retour d'un Aventurier*, we could not find a print with English subtitles (which meant that we had to get the dialogue translated, and these newly created subtitles were projected using the soft-titling system). Instead, this small selection of films is designed to represent significant stylistic, narrative and thematic approaches that have largely been neglected within accounts of African filmmaking of this period; thus, they may not be

'classics' in any traditional or popular sense of that term but they are aesthetically, intellectually and politically daring films whose significance has undeservedly been overlooked.

The screenings at AiM 2006 were accompanied by a roundtable discussion featuring a small number of theorists and critics of African cinema, each of whom has contributed to this dossier. Mark Cousins and Imruh Bakari reflect on the significance of the four films from different vantage points: Cousins focuses on the aesthetic innovation of these works and their relation to the canon, while Bakari examines the films as expressions of a self-confident African modernity in the heady days of the immediate post-independence era. Roy Armes and Jacqueline Maingard extend the range of discussion of African film history to include North and South African contexts respectively: Armes provides a fascinating insight into the role of women in the early development of North African cinema, while Maingard examines the complex relationship between post-apartheid cinema and its predecessors, which makes the establishment of any coherent form of genealogy highly problematic. We have also commissioned two further pieces, designed to explore the practical aspects of gaining access to the 'lost classics' of African cinema: film historian and curator June Givanni writes about the difficulties and challenges encountered in her years of experience programming African films for anglophone audiences at festivals and retrospectives around the world; finally, Anne Louyot discusses the *Plan Images Archives*, a project currently being run by the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs, which aims to digitize key works of early francophone African cinema held by the *Cinémathèque Afrique* in Paris.

What, then, did our project reveal about African cinema in general and these films and their directors in particular? On a practical and quite basic level, the project highlighted the importance of creating greater access to this early work, for most of the participants in the project, all of them keen observers of African cinema, were seeing these films either for the first time or for the first time in many years. All four films can be viewed at the *Cinémathèque Afrique* in Paris but its viewing resources are extremely limited (there is only one screening room) and its copies do not currently have English subtitles. The digitization project of the *Plan Images Archives* promises to give a new life to key works from the *Cinémathèque*'s collection, rendering it far easier for filmmakers to make their work available to audiences around the world.⁶ However, despite the potential boon of this project and the rise of the digital format in general, it is quite possible that Africa's classics will bypass DVD completely and head straight down the route of internet streaming – the South African media and communications giant M-Net has over the past two years acquired the rights to more than 400 African films (in some cases, these rights extend beyond internet diffusion to include screening rights for television and cinema also).⁷ Whether the internet route finally gives African cinema a genuine outlet through which to find an audience or whether it leads to its even greater marginalization within the film

⁶ In general, the rise of the DVD format is a potential boon for the lost classics of African cinema, although the recent US release of Mambéty's first three films (*Contrastes*, *City*, *Badou Boy*, *Touki Bouki*), under the title *The 70s African Punk Era*, one of the few recent African DVD ventures to have featured work from this earlier period.

⁷ See Fabienne Pompey, 'Le Web pourrait devenir l'unique écran de diffusion des films africains', *Le Monde*, 15 June 2007, p.29.

world remains to be seen. (The possibility of the internet helping this cinema to find a wide audience in Africa seems remote in the current circumstances since access to computer technology is largely the preserve of a social elite.)

As for the aesthetic and historical significance of these 'lost classics', the pieces by Cousins and Bakari give a clear sense of the excitement generated by the (re)discovery of this early work. For Bakari, these films are representative of the widely different forms taken by African creative engagement with the processes of modernity, and Cousins is positively glowing about the two films by Mambéty, *Badou Boy* in particular. The relative absence of engagement with Mambéty's two early films in key critical works has led to a somewhat truncated account of the development of this hugely important filmmaker's career, omitting significant aspects of his creative evolution.⁸ In *Contras' City* and *Badou Boy*, the brilliance of his later films can already be observed – his aesthetic daringness and the ironic, distorted and slightly detached look at the world that would mark his better-known feature films *Touki Bouki* and *Hyènes/Hyenas* (Senegal/Switzerland, 1992). The great tragedy of Mambéty's career is that he only managed to make two feature films, almost twenty years apart, but it would be deeply misleading to reduce his career solely to these two feature-length works, for he invested all of his creative energies in his four short and medium-length fiction films. As was mentioned above, even established African directors struggle to find the backing to make more than a handful of feature films.⁹ Any assessment of the great works of sub-Saharan filmmaking must thus be prepared to investigate these shorter formats. Working in shorter formats is often seen as a stepping stone to making fiction feature films, the main career ambition of most filmmakers the world over. However, in the case of African filmmakers, where the level of cinematic productivity is often determined by the crushing practical and financial difficulties facing African directors, short films cannot merely be regarded as part of the training and development of a filmmaker's career.

In the cases of Alassane and Ecaré, their relative absence from African film scholarship has in effect led to the relegation of these directors and their particular film styles to a marginal position within African cinema as a whole: most critical studies include only passing references to these films, or ignore them altogether. Ecaré's film is highly unusual for African films of this period in its treatment of sexuality and desire, and its suggestive and experimental aesthetic, reminiscent of the French new wave: its stylish and self-conscious shot composition and editing (audiences in Edinburgh were electrified by the brilliant cutaway from a beautiful young couple lying in bed to an African street cleaner moving dustbins in the street below) and its concern with mood and character psychology clearly distinguish it from the neorealist approach of many other African films of the period. That such a promising young director was to wait almost twenty years before making his sole feature film,

⁸ For instance, both films are dealt with in passing by both Diawara, *African Cinema* and Ukadike, *Black African Cinema*.

⁹ For example, the great Malian filmmaker Souleymane Cissé, director of *Yeelen*, which won the *Palme d'or* at Cannes in 1987, has made just five feature films in over thirty years and has not made a film since his last, *Waati*, met with public and critical indifference in 1995.

Visages de Femmes/Faces of Women (Ivory Coast/France, 1985) is a sad commentary on the constraints under which African directors work.

Alassane directed his first film *Aouré* (Niger/France) in 1962, and it is considered by some to predate Sembène's *Borom Sarret* (Senegal/France, 1962), which is generally hailed as the first film by a sub-Saharan African to be made in Africa itself. *Le Retour d'un aventurier* displays the innovation and exuberance of a talented young director learning his craft (Alassane made the film at the age of just twenty-four; indeed, all three of the directors featured in the 'lost classics' programme were precocious talents in their twenties at the time these films were made). Alassane moved through a range of styles throughout the 1960s and early 1970s (fable, parody, social satire) and later became one of the first African animation filmmakers, a form in which he still works. By any measure, he has thus played something of a pioneering role in African cinema but he is nonetheless generally overlooked in historical accounts: it is Sembène who became known as 'the father of African cinema' but we wonder how our understanding of African cinema might have developed differently if Alassane rather than Sembène had been posited as a 'founding father'.

If an alternative genealogy such as this had emerged, the idea that a radical, politicized cinema of the 1960s and 1970s gave way to a less explicitly political, more 'personal' style from the 1980s would now seem completely misleading, for the existence of parallel aesthetics already present in that early period would be highlighted more clearly. This brings us to the most important questions raised by the 'lost classics' project: the periodization of African film history and the difficulty of establishing potential genealogies of different film styles and genres. For many years, African film criticism promoted a form of 'exceptionalism', which viewed the development of African cinema largely in isolation from filmmaking practice in other parts of the world: films were regularly categorized by theme, as the stylistic approach was taken virtually for granted. Given the specific circumstances of the birth of sub-Saharan African cinema in the era of African decolonization and the development of the concept of 'Third Cinema', this critical approach was highly understandable but it eventually created a critical and intellectual impasse in thinking about filmmaking in Africa. In this context, a brilliant African director such as Mambéty long found himself cast in the middle of tortuous critical debates characterizing his work as either emblematically African or as soulless copies of a western avant garde due to the perceived need to fit directors into a single African aesthetic. However, when viewed alongside Ecaré and Alassane, Mambéty can be seen as part of a general movement within this early period of African filmmaking, which explored less directly political or realist cinematic paths. African cinema might thus be viewed in its diversity rather than within a monolithic framework. The films of contemporary directors such as Jean-Pierre Bekolo and Abderrahmane Sissako build on the approach of Mambéty (Bekolo explicitly evokes Mambéty as

10 For further ideas on this subject, see the introduction to David Murphy and Patrick Williams, *Postcolonial African Cinema: Ten Directors* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007).

11 The second Lost Classics project was part of AiM 2007, which took place from 25 October to 4 November 2007 at the Filmhouse in Edinburgh. The festival also included a tribute to Ousmane Sembène, which acts as a clear indication that, while challenging critical orthodoxies about African cinema, we are in no way seeking somehow to displace Sembène or the highly politicized, largely realist tradition of African filmmaking but rather to create a more complex understanding of African cinema as a whole. We would like to acknowledge the support of The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, which has made this second stage of the project possible.

an inspiration) just as Cheick Oumar Sissoko taps into the realist aesthetic of Sembène.¹⁰ Equally, African film criticism, which has long focused largely on works emanating from francophone West Africa (as, indeed, did our own project), needs to expand its horizons to provide more complex and nuanced accounts of filmmaking in other parts of the continent, such as North and South Africa, as is shown below in the contributions here from Armes and Maingard.

The next stage of our ongoing exploration of neglected African film classics will focus on the work of pioneering female directors, including Safi Faye and Sarah Maldoror, amongst others.¹¹ We use the term ‘ongoing’ advisedly, for the process of locating and recovering ‘lost classics’ is inherently open-ended. The creation of a canon implies a focus on certain works, and every focus implies an exclusion; although such exclusions are perhaps necessary and even inevitable in any attempt to define a field, it is vital that this process of exclusion not be ignored, for this can lead to the canon being perceived as an entirely natural and organic entity. Consequently, the processes of canon formation must be constantly interrogated and challenged in order to prevent them lapsing into the type of conservatism identified above. Above all, then, the various practical and theoretical strands of our work are designed to contribute to the long-overdue recognition of the diversity, innovation and artistry of the most marginalized and under-represented cinema in the world. Allowing these films to be screened is to give them a new lease of life, to give them an audience and to provide critics with access to works that have long since drifted into the footnotes of African film history; in essence, a process that may allow these ‘lost classics’ to be found, and to acquire the ‘classic’ status that they deserve.

Colonialism and modern lives in African cinema

IMRUH BAKARI

Cinema arrived in Africa within two years of its first public display in Europe and thereafter this modern cultural activity developed a unique place in the twentieth-century culture of the continent. Needless to say, the seminal role of cinema in Africa was defined within the context of colonial societies. It is well accepted that 'Colonialism was about the seizing of place, draining it of its resources, its history and the meaning attributed by its primary occupants'.¹ This was nothing less than a reordering and a restructuring that facilitated both dependency and underdevelopment. With due regard for variations in national tendencies, Edward Said argues that '[colonialism and imperialism] are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination'.² As a result there exists the insidious racism and the cultures of dependency that have come to typify the global status quo.

In Africa, cinema was at the forefront of the construction of a modernity that incorporated these assumptions. Institutionally, perceptions were buttressed by legal frameworks, such as the Cinematographic Regulations Act for British colonies. These instruments of order provided markers for the production of films, which differentiated what was appropriate for European and American audiences from that which was perceived to be suitable for Africans. In this way, the idea of cinema as modern entertainment became entangled in the politics of colonial society. Films such as *Tarzan of the Apes* (Scott Sidney, 1918), *Congorilla* (Martin and Osa Johnson, 1932) and *Hatari* (Howard Hawks, 1962), for example, stand in stark relief to the films

¹ Radika Mohanram, *Black Body: Women, Colonialism and Space*, Public Worlds, Volume VI (Minneapolis, MN and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), pp. 200–01.

² Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, NY and London: Vintage, 1994), p. 8. Emphasis in original.

- 3 Sylvia Wynter, 'Africa, the West and the analogy of culture: the cinematic text after man', in June Giovanni (ed.), *Symbolic Narratives/African Cinema: Audiences, Theory and the Moving Image* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), pp. 25–76, p. 34.

produced for African audiences, such as those resulting from Major Notcutt's Bantu Education Cinema Experiment (1935–39), the Colonial Film Units (1939–55), and the apartheid cinema of South Africa.

What is instructive here is the way in which policies that influenced the production of films for African audiences in colonial society were adopted to serve the needs of the newly independent states that emerged from the late 1950s. As a result we find 'colonial film units' being transformed into various 'state film companies' charged with producing films, which employed a decidedly didactic approach based largely on the same assumptions as those of the colonial regimes.

Colonial society is predicated on the idea that access to the means of self-representation should be denied to the 'native'. It can be argued that where such access was permitted, the dominant institutional position supported forms of expression that reinforced the sentiments of compliance that were born of an ideology of dependence. To a great degree this is what the anticolonial struggles sought to challenge on a political level. However, as Sylvia Wynter suggests, 'independence . . . goes beyond the "political"', beyond even the economic in order to touch upon the question of representation, the representational apparatus, and of the culture-specific memory and mode of consciousness which it institutes'.³ It thus becomes evident that an engagement with representation and representational strategies has been severely compromised by the concern of postcolonial governments with securing and maintaining the privileges of small political elites in their respective states.

Postcolonial regimes, as inheritors of colonial institutional thinking, were required to accept notions of subservience and compliance as prerequisites to inclusion and development. In doing so, concerns about the issues of culture and representation have been raised principally in terms of a perceived threat to 'traditional values' by 'foreign' influences. This kind of panic provides a mask for the invariable perpetuation of the symbolic order of colonialism, as postcolonial regimes also seek to deliver pacification and dependency in the guise of law and order. Hence, to engage further with Wynter's argument, there are fundamentally contentious issues underlying the discourses that inform the perceptions of 'African' and 'European' subjectivities: in the former there is a consummate 'victim' and in the later, a timeless 'hero'. Shaped within the tyranny of colonialism, these subjectivities frame the paradigm of a hegemonic 'memory of *Man*', while raising a question that is no less than an epistemological challenge for African cinema:

How . . . are the filmmakers of black Africa to confront and deal with the dichotomy which seems to definitely separate the possibilities of a commercialised mass appreciation of African cinema, and of African cinema as a valued cultural art form? What if . . . the either/or choice of a commercial mass success, on the one hand, or of seeking to produce a cinema of aesthetic force and cultural integrity on the other

4 Ibid., p. 32. Emphasis in original.

hand – what if this would call for the elaboration of a new conceptual ground? Would such a new ground not have to be one which . . . moves outside the parameters of the memory of *Man*, as the memory to which we are at present submitted? Outside its understanding of our own humanity?⁴

Wynter's questioning signals a persuasive case for viewing African cinema as an attempt to establish a new symbolic order for postcolonial Africa.

The films referred to as 'lost classics' in the Africa in Motion season are all concerned with the question of what it means to be both African and modern. These four films are distinguished by the experimental, transgressive form of their narratives, which interrogate standard notions of order in their societies. There is an implicit subversion of institutionalized assumptions about Africans, and there is a sustained interrogation of the processes of (colonial) appropriation and domestication, which are constituent elements of modernity. This is seen most clearly in the work of Djibril Diop Mambéty, particularly because of the way in which the themes and strategies of *Badou Boy* and *Contras' City* are reworked and refined in his two major films, *Touki Bouki* (1973) and *Hyènes* (1992). The characters of these films are both committed and clear-sighted; they have consciously chosen to be what the regimes of law and order say they should not. Their lives exist in opposition, simply by the fact of their insistence on being citizens, where no such institutional licence exists. Importantly, Mambéty's subjects do not seek to provide a rationale that leads to a redemptive alternative. They are marginalized and exist to inhabit and disfigure the ordered pretence of civility which hides the despotism of colonial and, ultimately, post-colonial power.

All over Africa during the colonial era, a modern African subject came into being, unofficial and incongruous to the official discourses framed around the paradigm of the colonist and the so-called native anticolonial hero; this emergence was a focus for varying degrees of alarm in the newly independent states. The South African based *Drum* magazine of October 1959 suggested that:

a new type of young man is making his appearance in the large cities and towns. In South Africa there are the 'Ducktails' (white) and the 'Tsotsis' (black), in Britain the 'Teddy Boys', in America the Beatniks, in Australia, Bodgies. And in Ghana we've got Tokio Joe who symbolises a new, vibrant generation that is as high-spirited as it is controversial.⁵

The essence of this high-spirited presence is captured by Mambéty in his early films. In *Badou Boy*, allusions to modernity, its conspicuous consumption, its technology, its mechanized speed and the ever-present officer of the law, inscribe a certain knowledge which, while being presented as parody, offer something much more fundamental in the

5 'Tokio Joes', *Drum Magazine* (October 1959), in Helen Lunn (ed.), *The Beat of Drum*, Volume II (Johannesburg: J.R.A. Bailey, 1983), p. 42.

form of a pervasive subaltern presence. As in Sembène's *Borom Sarret* (1962), *Contras' City* remaps the urban landscape of the city, delineating the territory and marking its boundaries.

The visual and aural evidence in *Contras' City* illustrates modern everyday lives in the African urban environment as interwoven with the symbolism and ideas of a global experience. In Alassane's *Le Retour d'un aventurier* and indeed in *Badou Boy*, costume and the carnivalesque are used to actualize the resulting marginalized subjectivity of the underclass. In *Badou Boy* this is enhanced to a heightened dramatic effect by the dissonance of the soundtrack, which suggests a kind of dangerous knowledge inhabiting a place that it should not. *Le Retour d'un aventurier* and Ecaré's *Concerto pour un exil* represent modernity as a transcendent global experience beyond the ambiguous boundaries of the nation state.

The rediscovery of *Le Retour d'un aventurier* obliges critics to engage in a reappraisal of the career of Moustapha Alassane, who continues to make films to this day. This Nigerien filmmaker, born in 1942, made his first films in 1962, and over the years, has been one of the few animators working in African cinema. In terms of genre, *Le Retour d'un aventurier* is not an African Western, as it is usually termed: I would argue that such views enclose African cinema within a framework that consistently views the idea of foreign influence as a threat. The horse has, for centuries, been part of the life of various African societies, and so too has been the figure of the non-conformist female. However, the film appropriates hieroglyphic material from the Western and uses it to masquerade the generational crisis, embodied in the persona of the Tsotsi and Tokio Joe. The film plays out the politics of this presence as a parody of the urban/rural dichotomy. The cowboy adventurer of Alassane's film is, in reality, the rural equivalent of Mambéty's *Badou Boy*, or indeed Mory and Anta in *Touki Bouki*, who in the metropolitan centre of Europe become the equally troubled figures of exile.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the question of the African exile is a major topic in what is now termed a globalized world. Bodies washed up on Mediterranean coastlines, economic refugees and human trafficking all inform the current discourse of exile, even as it intersects with the notion of diaspora. Colonialism and the postcolonial state are both implicated in these contemporary manifestations. Some of the underlying sentiments of *Concerto pour un exil* therefore continue to have resonance. At the heart of this narrative is a student leader who is no doubt refining his leadership and governance skills in the guise of conducting the business of the students' organization. With his group of student friends, life seems to move nonchalantly from one crisis to another. Yet our student leader is very calculated when pressed to respond to a threat to his position in the organization. He plans an election meeting, reserves the meeting room for three hours, and speaks for three hours to avoid the election taking place. Considered in relation to the apparent detachment from the crises in their day-to-day lives, the

prospect that this group might well ascend to political power in the post-independence state offers a very poignant subtext.

Concerto pour un exil can be situated within the same vein as works such as Paulin Soumanou Vieyra's *Afrique sur Seine* (Senegal/France, 1955), Jean Rouch's collaboration *Moi, un noir* (1957), and Sembène's *La Noire de/Black Girl* (Senegal/France, 1966). These films, together with *Le Retour d'un aventurier*, *Badou Boy* and *Contras' City*, all in some way begin to foreground the contradictory perceptions about how Africa is imagined and lived by its people. The subtext is modernity itself, the validity of the nation state, and the idea of belonging, all of which find a fuller expression in a feature film of the period, Med Hondo's *Soleil O* (Mauritania/France, 1969). Most importantly however, the subjectivity of the 'native' in these classics is framed not as victim (as might be argued in relation to *Borom Sarret* and *La Noire de . . .*), but as citizen.

Africa as a colonial construct confounds the indexical assumptions at the heart of the project of modernity. As these assumptions persist and provide reference points for the development of an acceptable Africa, responsive to development and governance, the conundrum of the postcolonial unravels. Africa is not a nation, and is yet to emerge as a union, functioning through grounded civil institutions. A significant part of this is the ongoing struggle for an African film industry. By re-engaging with these lost classics, there is undoubtedly an opportunity to interrogate the experience of cinema in Africa within the context of postcolonial institutions. In so doing, the function of the creative industries and indeed African filmmakers may be contemplated in terms of their relevance to the process of the much-desired social transformation of the continent.

Discovering Africa's Orson Welles

MARK COUSINS

The *New York Times* recently estimated that there are approximately two thousand film festivals in the world. Many of these conform to the standard formula of starry opening nights, competition sections, retrospectives and sidebars, so there is a pressing need to invent new film festival forms, genres and rationales. Among the most enduring of the old rationales are the three listed by the Cannes Film Festival's Gilles Jacob: festivals should be places of discovery, confirmation and defence. They should discover talent, confirm its development by continuing to screen a director's work, and act as a bulwark against those forces of commerce and *ennui* in the film world that threaten the very idea of cinema as an art.

The Lost Classics programme that was screened during Africa in Motion in 2006 discovered, confirmed and defended, but for many people, indigenous African film remains undiscovered. Most anglophone cinephiles are not yet at the stage of confirming that Djibril Diop Mambéty is great, but are still in discovery mode. For this reason, most of the films in Africa in Motion were a revelation, its Lost African Classics section particularly so. The title Lost African Classics implies that the films in this section were of sufficient aesthetic merit to be compared to the better known African films that are usually considered the continent's greatest cinematic achievements. That they are 'lost' suggests either a process of film-historical forgetting – they were once remembered but now are not – or a case of inadequate distribution and insufficient critical attention – they have not been forgotten because they were never remembered in the first place.

As someone who writes about and broadcasts on African film, I had seen none of the four films presented in Lost African Classics. Moustapha Alassane's *Le Retour d'un aventurier* (1966) was more

playful than I had expected, and a missing link in the continent's comic negotiation of where it stands in relation to colonizing modes of film. Filmmakers often seem to need to work the pastiche mode out of their system, to move through its enticing opportunities for ventriloquizing the local through, in this case, the cowboy movie. This is not to say that African cinema should have to wipe its hands of the Western genre thereafter (Teboho Mahlatsi's recent sixteen-minute *Meokgo and the Stickfighter* (2006) was a South African pastiche of spaghetti Westerns), but that the obviously lampoonable must have the mickey taken before filmmakers can move on. Alassane's film did both.

Désiré Ecaré's *Concerto pour un Exil* (1968) ventriloquized too, though the dummy through which it spoke was, in part, European art-house cinema. Exquisitely shot and framed, it contributed to one's understanding of the African cinema of exile. It would be productive to curate it in a double-bill programme with, for example, François Truffaut's *Baisers Volés* (1968), as part of a season on the French new wave. To insert a film about Africans living in France into such a programme would challenge the fact that the new wave is usually thought of as white filmmaking.

It was, however, the screening of the two Mambéty films – *Contras' City* and *Badou Boy* – which brought about a shift in my understanding of African film aesthetics. Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* can, in its precocious stylistic display and sonic innovation, be considered Africa's *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) so seeing his two featurettes was like discovering earlier works of Welles that reveal his style already to be fully formed. *Contras' City* is a classic early example of those films that pitch the colonial real against the satiric. Its use of voiceover – a conversation between a male Senegalese and a French woman – is as complex, at times, as the half-invented commentary exchanges in Chris Marker's films. At one point the voiceover quips 'your colleagues built many distilleries. . . . So many Imams' sons gave up the Qu'oran for the liqu'oran.'

At first sight *Badou Boy* seems less acerbic, but quickly it becomes clear that Mambéty is at his brilliant best here, orchestrating layers of sound for their tonal, satiric and ontological value. None of the sound is in synch. A radio provides one layer. Sonic effects as in a sci-fi movie (or the Indian films of Ritwik Ghatak) supply a second. Then there are foleyed approximations of onscreen activity, and Wellesian overlapping dialogue and repetitions. The result is *cinéma absurde*, a baroque cinematic circus in Wolof, a Brechtian, mocking, symbolic bus ride (*Contras' City* and *Touki Bouki* are about rides too) through Dakar.

The sonic complexity of the film, its state of the nationness, its Joycean wandering, its allegorical fun, convinced me that *Badou Boy* is undisputedly a lost classic (in both the recovered memory sense and the newly introduced sense). It is as important to African Cinema as, say, *Le Sang d'un poète* (Jean Cocteau, 1930) is to French cinema – perhaps more so. It reveals the origins of the aesthetic confidence, the joy in

mocking, filming and thinking that can be seen in *Touki Bouki*. Mambéty's developed his singular filmic stance earlier than I had thought; African cinema had to contain his highwire act earlier than I knew. Ousmane Sembène filmed faces beautifully, as beautifully as Pier Paolo Pasolini, but Mambéty understood that filmed faces are destinations in themselves, not vehicles for identification or narrative, not talking heads. If we compare how a face is photographed in *Badou Boy* to how one is photographed in, say, *Accatone* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1961) or Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), or the films of Robert Flaherty or Mario Peixoto's *Limite* (1931), we find that Mambéty holds his own, in ways that surprised me. If film festivals are about discovery, then the Lost African Classics section of Africa in Motion had real discoveries.

Of course, if you find something new, you do not keep it to yourself. That is what this publication is about. When *Sight and Sound* asked me for my list of the best films I saw in 2006, I put *Badou Boy* on it and explained why. I mentioned it to the BFI Southbank's head of film programming Geoff Andrew. I was somewhat involved in establishing a link with the Curzon cinema circuit in London that showed selections from Africa in Motion. These are small things, but their aim is, in a modest way, to form a canon. By canon I mean that shifting body of films that are referred to in movie magazines, shown to film students, screened on cinémathèques' film history courses, mentioned on radio programmes, appear on internet polls and scored on websites like Facebook as indicators of mutual compatibility. There is no one canon, of course, and they are influenced by gender, class, ethnicity and generation, but certain titles seem to have made it into popular discourse. Such films remain 'in the air' in part because they are regularly screened but also, I would argue, because of popular cultural film discourse's lack of curiosity about other films, its imperviousness to newness, its inertia.

To form a canon and have Mambéty talked about in the same way as John Cassavetes, for example, is an entryist strategy. Unless we are happy with the aesthetic, geographical and thematic range of films that are in the air of our film culture (which we most definitely should not be), I believe that we must seek to introduce ignored films – calling them lost classics if necessary – into the canon. It does not matter if, as a result, other films are shunted out. The very idea of a canon or canons, consensuses of taste and evaluation, has been ambiguous at best. On the one hand they are bulwarks against the forgetting of cinematic heritage – Jacob's point – but, on the other, they are likely to be too fixed to be sensitive to revisionist history, or the considered taste of audiences of differing classes, ages, sexualities and ethnicities. In pre-internet culture, when things got known by entering what was then called the mainstream, African cinema failed to secure more than a toehold on cinephilic imagination around the world. How many of these who revered *8½* (Federico Fellini, 1963) or *Rashomon* (Akira Kurosawa, 1950) had ever heard of *Touki Bouki*? In the era of the internet and the long tail, whilst the concept of 'mainstream' still exists to a certain extent, there are so

many other streams and cross-currents, subterranean rivers and ways to them, that interventionist strategies that disrupt a conservative process of canon-formation not only stand a chance of working, but the films, careers, genres, movements and cinematic regions they advocate really can come back from the dead. They can stop being lost classics and become found ones.

For this to happen, someone like David Murphy, acting on behalf of something like Africa in Motion, has to go somewhere like the *Cinémathèque Afrique* in Paris and watch lots of films, select the good, rarely seen ones, then hand them to people like Lizelle Bisschoff and Melissa Trachtenberg, who will present them in a festival for people like me to see. This work costs money of course and needs scholarship – you need to know where to shine the torch. Lost African Classics had a little of the former but plenty of the latter and that is why it has been able to unearth and canonize – we should not be afraid of the word – but, more importantly, illuminate and contextualize, films as splendid and crucial for world cinema as *Badou Boy*.

South African cinema: histories and futures

JACQUELINE MAINGARD

In 2006 the film *Tsotsi* (Gavin Hood, 2005) won an Academy Award for the best foreign film, the first Oscar for South African cinema, twelve years after the country's first democratic elections. In some ways this was no surprise, given that *Tsotsi*'s production values positioned it in an international film market (over)determined by Hollywood. It does however raise questions about how South Africa is being represented to global audiences. Not only does *Tsotsi* neatly resolve its narrative with a redemptive conclusion that portrays a more hopeful humanity than would probably be the case in historical reality, it also adopts a genre that could become a vogue for representations of black South African experience, namely a black gangster genre (not unlike similar developments in the USA). The film's very powerful opening highlights this with its closeup display of hands playing dice, one of them nervously shaking a knife with a sharply pointed blade, and the jostling voices of *Tsotsi*'s maverick gang suggesting that life's a game and it all depends on where the dice lands. Soon afterwards we see the gang swaggering through the township streets, *Tsotsi* (Presley Chweneyagae) in medium closeup in the centre, in a heightened display of fearless masculinity, ignoring the taunts of local residents, with booming township *kwaito* music dominating the soundtrack. The last image of the film can be juxtaposed against this as *Tsotsi* fills the frame in mid-shot, his hands up against police guns, defeated but doing the honourable thing. Order is restored; whilst the film opens up new frames for perceptions of black identities, it does so in relatively conservative terms.¹

Representations of black identity in South African cinema have a complex history dominated by colonial and Afrikaner nationalist

¹ All the films cited in this piece are discussed in detail in Jacqueline Maingard, *South African National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2008 forthcoming).

perspectives in early films, for example *De Voortrekkers/Winning a Continent* (Harold Shaw, 1916), in which black identity is portrayed as either uncivilized, in the form of cruel and savage Zulu warriors, or servile in the face of white domination. As Afrikaner nationalism gained ground in the 1930s, cinema was deployed to advance its interests. For example, *Die Bou van 'n Nasie/They Built a Nation* (Joseph Albrecht, 1938) was commissioned by the government to coincide with both the *voortrekker* centenary celebrations of the defeat of the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River (in reality the Ncome River) in 1838 and the laying of the foundation stone of the Voortrekker Monument. In this film, black identity is portrayed as primitive in Darwinian terms. The film positions the beginning of South African history with the encounters of the first 'civilizing' white colonizers of the fifteenth century and concludes at the point of Union in 1910, when British imperial and Afrikaner nationalist interests were united against the threat of black empowerment and advancement. The film *'n Nasie hou koers* (Hans Rompel, 1940), literally translated as 'a nation keeps on course', documents the centenary celebrations using the footage of amateur camerapersons following the nine ox-wagon treks that replicated the journeys of the *voortrekkers*, reconfirming the significance of the Afrikaner 'nation' in the face of increasing black modernity.

Historically, prior to the post-apartheid period, South African cinema was not solely dominated by white interests in these ways. In 1949, for example, the first of a small cluster of films that represented black identities in new formulations was produced. *Jim Comes to Joburg* (aka *African Jim*) (Donald Swanson, 1949) celebrates the move of black ruralite Jim (Daniel Adnewmah) to the city, where he is initially mugged and robbed by black hoodlums, modelled on Hollywood 1930s/1940s gangsters, but finds his feet against the odds, transforms into a suave, sophisticated urbanite and lands a singing contract by the end of the film. The National Party had come into power in 1948 and was entrenching apartheid through legislative measures promulgated in the 1950s. This was the 'decade of defiance', when black political organizations, mainly the African National Congress, publicly resisted apartheid through protests and demonstrations against the state. In this context, the docudrama *Come Back, Africa* (Lionel Rogosin, 1959), a classic in its own right, evocatively explores apartheid from a black point of view through the figure of the migrant worker Zacharia (Zacharia Mgabi), who seeks work in the city, is thwarted by white racism and apartheid laws, and by the end of the film is a victim of township violence. Directed by US-based Rogosin, the film was cowritten by *Drum* journalists Bloke Modisane and Lewis Nkosi. But any potential for a more developed black cinema in South Africa at that time was clearly not to be realized under apartheid and these and many other artists, actors and writers were forced into exile. Lionel Ngakane, who had worked with Zoltan Korda on *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1951), relocated to the UK, where he produced a short film *Jemima and Johnny* (1966) that reflects upon the

- 2 For recent discussion of anti-apartheid documentaries, see Jacqueline Maingard, 'Framing South African national cinema and television', in Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela (eds), *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa* (Detroit, IL: Wayne State University Press, 2003), pp. 115–31.

black–white racial divide through the eyes of two small children, one black, from a recently arrived Jamaican family, the other white, with a father who is a member of the British National Party. The innocence of the two children dominates the film as they run through the streets together holding hands, accompanied by a child-like ditty on the soundtrack, the camera tracking their perspective and operating at the level of their eyes, reinforcing their point of view.

It was not until the 1980s, however, that a concerted anti-apartheid cinema developed in South Africa, primarily through documentary film.² In fiction film, *Mapantsula* (Oliver Schmitz, 1988) stands out as the exemplary anti-apartheid film of the period. The filmmakers explicitly drew attention to the fact that it self-consciously represented a black point of view of that moment in South Africa's history when apartheid was all-dominant, a state of emergency had been imposed, major political organizations were banned, and Nelson Mandela and other political leaders were still in prison. The ANC had declared its intent to make the country ungovernable through various political strategies such as township rent boycotts, which form the context for *Mapantsula*. The black perspective that the film promotes is expressed not only in its overall narrative and the casting of the central character Panic (Thomas Mogotlane), but also in its camerawork. This is evident in a scene in which Panic boards a bus in the city centre bound for the white suburb, where his girlfriend Pat (Thembi Mtshali) is a domestic worker. As the camera observes through the bus window the high walls and lavish gardens symbolic of white affluence, the ambient sound is replaced by reflective, melancholic music that evokes Panic's interiority. The camera pans left purposefully to encompass Panic in mid-shot looking out of the window, held in the left edge of the frame as the shot and accompanying music continues. The geography of apartheid is thus highlighted in strong binary terms, juxtaposing township-trapped Panic against white suburban exclusion, and all that this signifies. Given the sociopolitical context within which *Mapantsula* was produced and its intense focus on Panic's experience, reinforcing a black perspective on the atrocities of the apartheid state, it can be seen as one of the great South African films of the period from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, when the possibility of a post-apartheid society was beginning to be glimpsed, even as apartheid was still very much entrenched.

Beyond apartheid, under a democratic state, South African cinema has been afforded some opportunities to reconstruct alternative visions of South African identities. In particular, film policy has played a role in creating the potential for a new and diverse cinema. In the late 1980s, when the anti-apartheid Film and Allied Workers Organization (FAWO) was established, one of its primary aims was to redress the imbalances of apartheid by developing educational opportunities for aspirant black filmmakers, exemplified in the establishment of the Newtown Film and Television School. The short film was recognized as key to unlocking potential talent and to identifying and telling South African stories.

This was carried forward in various projects in the 1990s, not only by independents but also by the national television broadcaster, the South African Broadcasting Corporation, and by the television pay station, M-Net (Electronic Media Network), as well as by government itself. The National Film and Video Foundation Act (1997), which promulgated the establishment of the National Film and Video Foundation, names the short film as one of the key areas for development. Dumisani Phakathi is an example of a filmmaker who has developed his talent through the short film format, in both documentary and fiction. One of his films, *Waiting for Valdez* (2002), written by Teddy Mattera, evocatively explores questions of identity through a young boy, Sharky, and his friends, in a short story set in the 1970s. The film describes his experiences living with his grandmother (Dolly Rathebe), hanging out with his neighbourhood friends, and being bullied at school. It is an engaging film about the cinema itself – the boys recounting episodes from *Valdez is Coming* (Edwin Sherin, USA, 1971) around the brazier at night – but also about the complexities of identity, especially racial identity. This emerges through the boys' conversations with each other and also through the revelations that Sharky's grandmother makes about her mixed ancestry. These complexities are especially accessible because of the film's engaging qualities but the localized nuances of the story would not necessarily be recognized by international audiences – or possibly even by some national ones – and raises questions about the marketability of films that tell intimately local stories.

Other filmmakers who have come through the short film route include Bkekizizwe Peterson, screenwriter for *Fools* (Ramadan Suleman, 1997) and *Zulu Love Letter* (Ramadan Suleman, 2004). *Zulu Love Letter* is an extraordinary film that situates black women as key characters in the narrative, primarily through Thandeka (Pamela Nomvete), a journalist, and her deaf teenage daughter Simangaliso (Mpumi Malatsi). The film plays out Thandeka's history, especially in excavating the truths of the apartheid past, in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission — represented in complex flashbacks that portray her confused memories of events she has witnessed, which she can hardly describe — woven into the complexities of her personal life, her inability to communicate with her daughter and the significance of all this for her daughter's future.³ In these flashbacks, the film replays the assassination of a young activist, Dineo, witnessed by Thandeka. The slow-motion images highlight the terror of the moment, using the camera repeatedly to identify iconic elements that signify the horror from Thandeka's perspective: the tyre of the assassins' car in closeup, sliding to a halt in the dust; the low-angle view of the assassin filmed from behind, his long coat flapping as he strides purposefully towards Dineo with the gun in his hand; Dineo's clenched fist defiantly rising as she shouts out the final word of a political slogan '*Awethu!*' (To the people!) as she is shot and killed. These repetitions make the final flashback all the more powerful, when we discover it to be more dream than flashback *per se*, tying

3 Peterson calls these flashbacks 'interludes'. See Joanna Sterkiewicz, 'Zulu Love Letter', *Screen Africa* (June 2003), p. 24.

Thandeka both cinematically and literally into a position of responsibility for Dineo's death. In this sequence, the elements of the flashback as we have previously seen them are changed. This time Thandeka is not just a silent witness, but enacts her engagement by leaving her car and running behind the assassin, shouting out 'Dineo! Dineo!', as if she could prevent her assassination and refute the hegemonic control of the assassin and, by extension, apartheid itself. This film is thus a powerful exposition not only of apartheid history but also of the challenge and responsibility to tell the stories emerging from it.

Whilst township and street gangsterism and violence will predictably continue to form a strong strand of representations of black identities, *Zulu Love Letter*'s choice of central female characters and of a narrative style that explores an aesthetic beyond Hollywood demonstrates that South African cinema is moving into less restricted terrain. There are projects developing that are forging possibilities for representing identities that have rarely been explored in the past, not only in relation to black identity specifically but also to gender and sexual orientation. The National Film and Video Foundation, for example, recently ran a competitive funding option specifically for film proposals from women. The Gay and Lesbian Film Festival has established a project funded by Atlantic Philanthropies producing short films in black townships that explore gay and lesbian issues and develop new audiences. These initiatives signify South African cinema's new potential in the post-apartheid era for a transformative cinema that redresses the imbalances of the apartheid past, moving beyond the binary divide of the official categories of apartheid identities. They build on the momentary visions provided by earlier South African or South African-related 'classics' like *Come Back, Africa*, *Jemima and Johnny* and *Mapantsula* and suggest that South African cinema might yet come of age not only in the global Hollywood-dominated world of cinema, but also in more diverse renditions of what cinema can achieve. The *Fédération Panafricaine des Cinéastes* has been located in South Africa since 2006, and a South African film *Drum* (Zola Maseko, 2004) won the main prize, the prestigious Etalon d'Or de Yennenga, for the first time at the *Festival Panafricain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou* in 2005. South African cinema is confronted with the challenge of making its mark within the broader African cinemascape as well as in the wider global market, whilst creating and sustaining local audiences, in the framework of its historical position beyond apartheid.

Women pioneers of Arab cinema

ROY ARMES

The task of searching for lost African classics is perhaps nowhere more complex than in relation to the cinematic output of African women. Many critics have commented upon the 'belated arrival' of filmmaking by sub-Saharan Africans in the early 1960s, but it is less frequently noted that the first films by African women (apart from the seemingly lost short documentary, *Tam-Tam à Paris*, by the Cameroonian director Thérèse Sita-Belle in 1963) did not appear until the 1970s and, even then, the pioneering work of the Senegalese director Safi Faye did not immediately inspire the emergence of films by other women filmmakers. Indeed, it was not until the mid-to-late 1990s, and the work of Fanta Régina Nacro amongst others, that African women finally began to make films in numbers that might indicate a broader shift in the filmmaking landscape.

In North Africa, the role of African women in the production of films has a much longer but no less hidden history. Though we are becoming more and more aware of the contribution of women filmmakers to the beginnings of Hollywood, as documented in, for example, Cari Beauchamp's work,¹ the role of women in the early development of Arab cinema is less well known. The English translation of Rebecca Hillauer's *Encyclopedia of Arab Women Filmmakers* is therefore extremely welcome, combining as it does critical investigations, interviews, film reviews and comprehensive filmographies.² Hillauer's introduction to the women pioneers of Egyptian cinema is stimulating and wide-ranging, but one key Arab voice she neglects is that of Haydée Tamzali (née Chikly), the daughter and collaborator of one of the most remarkable of all Arab or African pioneers, the Tunisian Albert Samama Chikly (1872–1934). An enthusiast for all aspects of western scientific development, Chikly had organized the first film screenings in Tunisia in 1897, explored radio

¹ Cari Beauchamp, *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA and London: University of California Press, 1997).

² Rebecca Hillauer, *Freiräume: Lebensträume, Arabische Filmmacherinnen* (Unkel am Rhein: Arte-edition, 2001). Published in translation by The American University in Cairo Press, 2005.

and X-ray technology, shot film from a balloon and underwater. During World War I he was a photographer with the French army, shooting film at the front at Verdun in 1916, and as a lifelong photographer he documented all aspects of Tunisian life. His film work comprises a pioneering short, *Zohra* (1922), and a first feature, *Aïn el ghazel/The Girl from Carthage* (1924), made three years before the first Egyptian fictional feature. Haydée Chikly, then still in her teens, was a key collaborator on both these films – writing the scripts and starring in them, as well as being in charge of the film editing. At this period she also appeared, alongside Ramon Novarro and Alice Terry, in Rex Ingram's *The Arab*, shot in Gabès and Gammarth in 1923. Ingram was apparently impressed enough to invite her to Hollywood, but her father insisted she stay in Tunis to complete her baccalaureate. *The Girl from Carthage* is, on one level, a typical 1920s melodrama. It tells of a girl who, faced with the prospect of an arranged marriage to an older man, runs away with a young schoolteacher and kills herself in the desert when he is murdered by gunmen hired by her family.

No doubt in part due to the country's relatively enlightened laws on their rights, women have played a major role in post-independence Tunisian cinema and the spirited defiance of this 1923 heroine, who refuses her imposed fate, finds striking echoes in several of the films directed by women over half a century later, such as Nejja Ben Mabrouk's pioneering *Sama/The Trace* (1988) and Moufida Tlatli's masterly *Samt el qusur/Silences of the Palace* (1994). In the 1990s Haydée Chikly herself played a small role in Ferid Boughedir's *Un Été à La Goulette/A Summer in La Goulette* (1996) and collaborated on a documentary by Mahmoud Ben Mahmoud about her father's career.

In Tunisia Chikly's pioneering efforts did not establish an immediate tradition of local film production and it was not until 1964 that a second Tunisian feature film, Omar Khelifi's *Al Fajr/The Dawn*, was released. But in Egypt the women pioneers chronicled by Hillauer did play a key role in the establishment of a national film industry. Leading the way were a number of powerful actresses who occasionally dabbled in film direction but who all played a long-term role in film production, helping to shape the direction of Egyptian filmmaking well into the period following World War II. The stage actress Aziza Amir (1901–52; real name Moufida Mohamed Ghoneim) was the driving force, as star and producer, behind what is generally recognized to be the first Egyptian silent fictional feature, *Leila*, which was first shown to great acclaim in Cairo on 16 November 1926. The industrialist Talaat Harb, who went on to launch the Egyptian film industry by establishing the Misr Studios, said of her that 'she achieved what men had not been able to achieve'.³ The production seems to have been tumultuous, with the version directed by one leading man (Wedad Orfi) being remade by another (Stephane Rosti), and with a happy ending given to what was originally intended as the tragic tale of a love-torn Bedouin woman betrayed by the man she loves. *Leila* also introduced the motif of an unmotivated dance by the

3 Kamal Ramzi, 'Des Pionnières qui ont enrichi le cinéma égyptien', in Magda Waseff (ed.), *Egypte, cent ans de cinéma* (Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe, 1995), p. 76

heroine into the narrative, thereby setting the pattern for hundreds of subsequent Egyptian film melodramas. Amir went on to star in some two dozen further films, many of them directed by her husband, the actor-director Mahmoud Zouflicar. There is some dispute as to whether she actually directed the two films for which she is sometimes given the director's credit, *Bint al-Nil/The Girl from the Nile* (1929) and *Kaffirî 'an khati'atik/Atone for your Sins* (1933), but what is certain is that she produced most of the films in which she starred through her own production company, Isis Films. She remained active as a leading actress and producer up to her death at the age of fifty-one.

Perhaps an even more important figure in the development of Egyptian cinema is the Lebanese-born Assia Dagher (1908-86; real name Almaza Dagher), who appeared as an extra in *Leila*. Two years later, in 1929, she went on to produce and star in *Ghâdat al-sahrâ'/The Beauty from the Desert* (directed by Wedad Orfi). This is the story of a woman, abducted and married against her will by the ruler of a neighbouring tribe, who struggles to escape and is eventually rescued by her childhood sweetheart. After playing the lead in sixteen films up to 1947, Dagher abandoned acting to work solely as a producer. In a long career lasting until 1970 she was responsible for some of the major works of Egyptian cinema, including Youssef Chahine's *Saladin* (1963) and Tewfik Saleh's *Yaumiyyat na'ib fi-l-aryaf/Diary of a Deputy Country Prosecutor* (1968).

Assia Dagher's niece, Mary Queeny (1916-2003; real name Marie Bouros Younes), who came with her from Lebanon in the 1920s, made her film acting debut as a child in *The Beauty from the Desert* (1929). She subsequently starred in about twenty further films up to 1953, some directed by Ahmed Galal, the pioneering filmmaker who had earlier worked with both Aziza Amir and Assia Dagher. They married in 1940 and four years later founded their own production company, Gala Films, which became a major force in Egyptian cinema and which Queeny continued to run after her husband's death in 1947. When the company was nationalised in the 1950s, she continued to work as a producer in the public sector. Later, when her son Nader Galal began his highly successful directing career in the early 1970s, she produced most of the films he directed until her retirement in 1982.

A fourth actress, who tried to make a career as director rather than as producer, achieved far less success. Bahiga Hafez (1908-83) was born into an aristocratic family with links to the monarchy. She was a talented musician and linguist who had studied at the Conservatoire in Paris. Hillauer records that 'she later composed all the music for her films and even accompanied some showings on piano'.⁴ Her initial contact with film was when she was chosen by Mohamed Karim to play the lead in his adaptation of Mohamed Hussein Heykal's celebrated novel *Zeinab* (1930), for which she also wrote a score recorded onto disc to accompany screenings of the film. The film celebrates the sufferings of a woman married to a man she does not love and whose family humiliates her. Hafez set up her own production company, Fanar Film, in 1932,

4 Hillauer, *Freiräume*, p. 29.

producing and co-directing *al-Dahâyâ/The Victims* with Ibrahim Lama, first as a silent film and then, in 1935, with a dubbed soundtrack. Her company also produced Mario Volpi's *al-Ittihâm/The Accusation* (1934). She then embarked on the direction of an expensive, personally funded version of *Layla bint al-sahrâ/Leila, the Girl from the Desert* (1937). This was the tale of a beautiful fifth-century Arab poetess, who was abducted by the King of Persia and subjected to numerous humiliations before being rescued by her childhood sweetheart. Hafez was financially ruined when the film was banned by the government, after protests from Iran (whose ruler was about to marry the Egyptian king's sister). The film was eventually re-edited and released as *Layla al-badawiyyah/Leila the Bedouin* in 1944.

Women have continued to play a significant but often overlooked role in Egyptian filmmaking, from Fatma Rouchdi (1908–96), who starred in some twenty films and directed *al-Zawâg/The Marriage* (1933), and Amina Mohamed (1908–1985), who was the driving force behind the collectively made *Tita wa Wong/Tita and Wong* (1937), to such contemporary figures as Asma al-Bakry and Ines al-Deghidi, but the positive, pioneering efforts of Aziza Amir, Assia Dagher, Mary Queeny and Bahiga Hafez, all of whom were constrained to play the screen roles of tormented and defeated women, remain unequalled. These figures deserve much greater attention from those critics who wish to chart a more nuanced history of North African filmmaking. We must go beyond the unthinking acceptance of the notion that North Africa is inherently patriarchal and that consequently women cannot have played a role in its cultural development: in these dangerous times when the Muslim world finds itself the object of so much western fear and loathing, a recognition of the role played by women in its film culture might just make a small contribution to a more nuanced understanding of this particular corner of the Islamic world.

Digging for gold

JUNE GIVANNI

Programming African cinema has always meant a voyage of exploration and discovery for the curator, as much as for the audience. It requires unearthing the lineage of each film – lineages of culture, history, cinematic endeavour, aesthetic language – elements that help an audience to situate it. This has often been the starting point leading to the identification of and search for ‘lost classics’.

Curators of African and African diaspora cinema write about and assess contemporary work in the context of national, regional and genre cinemas, as well as in the context of the filmmakers’ own work. As a curator specializing in African and African diaspora cinema since 1982, my search for that heritage and discussions of it have included a range of sources. In the 1980s and the early 1990s the main sources for the major body of African cinema – predominantly francophone – were to be found in Europe. For instance, I had seen Djibril Diop Mambéty’s *Touki Bouki*, but in the 1980s I had to go to the *Cinémathèque Afrique* at the Ministry for Co-operation and Development in Paris to view his early film *Badou Boy*. It was important that I spoke French, as none of these classic films was subtitled in English (though *Badou Boy* has very little dialogue). I also relied on the resources of the *Cinémathèque des Trois Mondes* in Paris to track down information about early African films and filmmakers.

Curators and programmers constantly search for new and challenging ways to present films. It is often necessary to break down the audience’s (and to some extent the distributors’, critics’ and funders’) preconceptions of African cinema, which is often narrowly defined as arthouse cinema lacking in popular appeal (at least to anglophone consumers), because films are subtitled. One strategy to challenge such preconceptions has been to include African films in international genre

- 1 NFA's viewing material list (not those in distribution) has a sprinkling of African classics, but most of its African list consists of films from the colonial era, with a predominance of South African films.

programmes, for example it might be exciting for Moustapha Alassane's *Le Retour d'un aventurier* to be critically discussed in the context of how the Western genre is presented through the imagination of an African director. A similar approach to Mambéty's *Touki Bouki* might bear fruit as it contains motifs that could link it both to the Western and the road movie genres, dealing with African experience of modernity in a way that displays its universal relevance.

Classic anglophone African films were even harder to track down. There was little or no documentation and the films were often owned and distributed by their producers. There was no comparable UK institution to the French Ministry of Cooperation and Development that funded or archived African films on a similar scale, and no non-governmental cultural institution that did so either.¹ So when I put together a comedy season at the Institute of Contemporary Art in the early 1990s, one of the sources I explored for some of the African material was the (then embryonic) African video shop. One of the first such shops in London in 1990 led me to discover the hugely popular Nigerian sitcom series *Basi & Co*, written and directed by Ken Saro-Wiwa (the writer and environmental campaigner who was executed by the Nigerian government in 1996). Another Nigerian film comedy I sought for the season was *Orun Mooru* (1982), a comic epic with special effects. Although codirected by Europe-based Nigerian director Ola Balogun, it required chasing and negotiating with the film's scriptwriter, star and producer, Baba Sala, in Nigeria (the script was based on Baba Sala's comic theatre play of the same name). Negotiation for its use by phone and fax was laborious and in the end we were unable to obtain a copy for public screening. However, seeking the use of this film demonstrated another unusual source and a further concern in tracking down and using African classics. Occasionally the copies of film prints are held for years by the film laboratories where they were processed, in London for example. Negotiation for use of such a film is necessarily expensive, unless the programmer is able to organize a sufficient number of guaranteed screenings to recoup the cost of the print.

The question of distribution is also a key factor in the availability of, and access to, African classics, although I will not dwell on this topic here, for other works have dealt with the distribution of francophone films in detail and have outlined how francophone African classics often belong to the French producers.² This pattern of ownership obviously has implications for where films are held, who is deciding their cultural value and who has access to them.

In the late 1980s, the veteran Senegalese filmmaker Paulin Vieyra listed the prerequisites for identifying African national cinema.³ For Vieyra, 'national cinema also implies the existence of training facilities such as Film Schools and various institutions, cinemathèques, archives, libraries, etc'.⁴ These infrastructures are few and far between on the continent, though they have been on the agenda of those seeking to develop cinema across the continent for many years. In 1995, the

2 For example, see Manthia Diawara, *African Cinema: Politics and Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), ch. 7.

3 Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, 'African cinema: solidarity and difference', in Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (eds), *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1989), pp. 195–8.

4 Ibid., p. 196.

Ouagadougou Pan-African Film Festival (FESPACO) and the Pan-African Federation of African Cinema (FEPACI) inaugurated their African Film Archive with a dedicated building, the Cinemathèque. The opening of the Film Archive was preceded by an international workshop on Archiving African Cinema in Ouagadougou in 1994, where criteria and policy for the collection of films were discussed. The Burkina Cinemathèque is now planning to issue its first catalogue in 2007. Beyond this, few African countries south of the Sahara have functioning 'film' archives, and the institutional collection and preservation of films is very rare. There is little information about which films are held by national archives, or the state of prints, so access is difficult. There is much to be done, and FEPACI is proposing a new strategy to tackle this problem on the continent; in addition, the fact that international initiatives are being developed through, for example, the World Cinema Foundation or the Bologna Cinemathèque suggests that there may be scope for some form of collaboration to deal with this important issue.

In the absence of organized African film archives, festivals with national programmes and retrospectives, and seasons of African cinema, continue to have an important part to play in documenting the sources and bringing films and filmmakers to audiences. Beyond the major festivals in Africa, often the only times that audiences would have a chance to see such classics are in repertory film venues and specialist festivals: for example, the Milan African Film Festival or the Festival des Trois Continents in Nantes, which provide director-led, national and thematic retrospectives. In the late 1980s, a search for Nigerian classics such as Halilu's *Shehu Umar* (1976) – shown in the Nigerian programme at the 1986 Nantes festival – or programming the anglophone African film and television, presented by Jim Pines at the BFI/Commonwealth Institute, both involved the programmers going to Nigeria to search for the films' owners and negotiating the intricate and expensive process of the rental and shipping of the prints, which sometimes despite all that preparation did not arrive.

Publications also remain an important source for programmers and curators, and for the sharing of information. The African film journal *Ecrans d'Afrique*, set up by FEPACI with producer partners The Milan African Film Festival, not only reviewed new African films by African critics but carried features on past classics and national cinemas in English and French and was a useful resource, but unfortunately it is no longer published. *Le Film africain* established by the Amiens International Film Festival provided similar reviews and features and there are, of course, a number of reference works that list African films and constitute an indispensable reference source. Anglophone sources are few and far between, but the UK's Africa at the Pictures Festival, the *bfn magazine*, and collections like California Newsreel's African Film Library occasionally provide the references to, and some rare opportunities to see, African classics in English. Africa in Motion's Lost

Classics section in 2006 was thus a special opportunity for British audiences to gain access to this early African work.

Finally, the two films *Caméra d'Afrique* and *Caméra Arabe* by Ferid Boughedir still constitute unique film reviews of classic African films and their pioneering filmmakers. However, documentaries that profile professionals of African cinema, such as *Al'leessi, une actrice africaine* (2005) by Nigerien director Rahmatou Keita, also provide a valuable film resource that serves to document and preserve that history. The documentary tells the story of the actress Zalika Souley who worked with Moustapha Alassane, and includes a clip of Alassanne's *Le Retour d'un aventurier*.

Unearthing African classics is a shared responsibility for many professionals in the cinema, academic and publishing industries. All have a part to play, but physically preserving such films and ensuring access to them requires clear strategies of preservation and archiving for the patrimony of cinema and of African culture to the benefit of all.

Plan Images Archives

ANNE LOUYOT

In 2005, the French Ministry for Foreign Affairs established a four-million-euro programme aimed at supporting cultural diversity in the countries of the South, which is one of the priorities of French foreign policy. It is certainly legitimate to question whether this focus on the cultural sphere is appropriate when the eradication of (extreme) poverty and the fight against disease and epidemics would seem to constitute more pressing challenges. However, France has made a conscious decision to place cultural issues on the same plane as the other major preoccupations of these peoples, a decision that was welcomed by UNESCO at the signing of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions in March 2007, which was supported by France and other European countries.

The Ministry's programme in favour of cultural diversity includes a specific plan, the *Plan Images Archives*, which is devoted to salvaging the audiovisual heritage of some of the poorest countries on the planet; it aims to support the preservation, management, development and diffusion of this audiovisual heritage, which is an essential element in the construction of the cultural identity of the peoples that produced it. The *Plan Images Archives* is concerned with film, radio, television and photographic material. People working in the audiovisual field in the countries of the South who wish to take part can send a request for funding or technical support to the Ministry for Foreign Affairs via the French Embassy in their own country. Ideally, these projects should involve more than the simple restoration or digitization of audiovisual material; they should include a plan designed to manage and exploit this material, thereby making it available to a wider public; projects must also be cofinanced.

Many projects have been approved for funding over the past two years: for example, the establishment of the Centre for Audiovisual Research in Phnom Penh (the pilot project of the *Plan Images Archives*), which opened in December 2006; the installation of the software necessary for the digitization and indexing of the audiovisual archives in various television stations across francophone Africa (in partnership with the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie); the development of a plan to maintain the audiovisual archives in Madagascar; the preservation of a photographic collection belonging to the mining company, Gécamines, in Lubumbashi (Democratic Republic of the Congo), which is a very important contribution to the historical record of African industrialization; and the support given to establishing an inventoried collection of old films at the Institute for Vietnamese Film in Hanoi.

The *Plan Images Archives* has been particularly interested in the preservation of African films, which lead such a precarious existence – often kept in foreign film laboratories, or stored in poor conditions in their home country – that in certain cases the original prints have been partially destroyed. Given the significance of this cinematic tradition within the broad history of world cinema, as well as its contribution to African cultural memory, it was decided that a special effort should go into safeguarding some of the oldest African films, as well as some of those works that best represent African cinematic creativity. This task was made possible by the existence of the *Cinémathèque Afrique*, which was created in the 1950s by the French Ministry for Co-operation (with a remit to support cinematic activity in francophone Africa), and is today part of the association *Culturesfrance*, which operates on behalf of the Ministries for Foreign Affairs and for Culture in the field of overseas cultural activity. The *Cinémathèque* holds around 1200 films, most of which have received French government funding and are from francophone Africa. Around 500 of these films are available for non-commercial screening by associations in France or by the French cultural network overseas, giving life to both old and new films from Africa well beyond the continent itself.

The preservation and digitization of the *Cinémathèque Afrique* collection began with the digitization of all those films that had won the main prize, the *Etalon de Yennenga*, at FESPACO (*Festival Pan-Africain du Cinéma et de la Télévision de Ouagadougou*), which takes place every two years in Ouagadougou), dating back to 1972. The original copies were located, cleaned and (where necessary) digitized. In certain cases, such as *Les Mille et une mains* by Moroccan director Souhel Ben Barka (Etalon, 1973), the soundtrack had been lost and had to be completely redone. A great classic of African cinema, *Muna Moto*, by the Cameroonian director Jean-Pierre Dikongue-Pipa (Etalon, 1976), can now be rediscovered after some major restoration work cleaned up the pockmarked and blackened images on the original negative. The filmmaker Gaston Kaboré was unable to hide his emotion when he saw

Buud Yam (Etalon 1997) in the glorious colour of its new DVD version. This technological support will allow the major titles of African cinema to reach a new (technological) generation and also to be screened more easily on television or on the internet. Moreover, a major subtitling project was also undertaken, and all of these films are now available in five languages: French, English, Arabic, Spanish and Portuguese. This first phase of the project will be completed by the digitization of the earliest works of African cinema, created well before FESPACO, films such as *Afrique sur Seine* (Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, 1955), *Et la neige n'était plus* (Ababacar Samb, 1965), or Moustapha Alassane's *Le Retour d'un aventurier*, the first African Western.

We sincerely hope that the project will have favourable financial repercussions for those in the African creative industries. The rights holders to these films have all received a digitized master copy of the works in question, which should give them a better hand when negotiating with distributors and television networks. The French Ministry for Foreign Affairs hopes that this process will kill two birds with one stone: by contributing to the preservation of major works, reflecting the richness and diversity of African cultures, and also by demonstrating that culture can be profitable, as long as it can adapt to contemporary technological challenges.

Translated by David Murphy

Drawing trauma: visual testimony in *Caché* and *J'ai 8 ans*

GUY AUSTIN

The Algerian War (1954–1962) is a trauma that runs through the recent social and cultural histories of France and Algeria, and which has also punctuated the film histories of those countries. For years after independence the only officially sanctioned topic of Algerian national cinema, the ‘undeclared war’ has been more marginal within French film, but has received much recent attention. The most talked about example of this is Michael Haneke’s *Caché* (2005) – as the recent *Screen* dossier testifies.¹ By and large, the approach taken in the dossier reflects the more general critical reception of *Caché*: a fascination with Haneke’s formal and ontological experimentation via point of view, the video image and the interpellation of the audience. Certain contributors also raised the political and ethical issues dependent on the film’s postcolonial context and the historical trauma it evoked. None of the analyses, however, mobilized trauma theory or looked in any depth at the function of the drawings (as opposed to the video images) within the film. It is my contention that the drawing of trauma is a crucial issue explored in *Caché* and one which relates the film back to contemporary accounts of the Algerian War by child witnesses. To modify Martine Beugnet’s assertion, I would suggest that the inscription of trauma in the body of *Caché* is achieved via the drawings (rather than the video image).²

The end of the war was initially constructed as a clean break that ended the colonial period of history. Hence, the Evian accords stated that no-one could be tried for crimes committed in the war, and ‘Algeria embodied then the myth of a pure historical rupture’.³ To the accords were added further laws in 1964, 1974 and 1983, forming ‘a sort of chain

¹ *Screen*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2007), pp. 211–49.

² Martine Beugnet, ‘Blind spot’, *Screen*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2007), p. 227.

³ Françoise Vergès, ‘Memories and names of Algeria’, *Parallax 7: Translating Algeria* (April–June 1998), p. 89.

- 4 Benjamin Stora, 'Quand une mémoire (de guerre) peut en cacher une autre (coloniale)', in Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire (eds), *La Fracture coloniale: la société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005), p. 58. My translation.
- 5 Benjamin Stora, 'L'absence d'images déréalise l'Algérie' [interview], *Cahiers du cinéma*, Spécial Algérie (February 2003), p. 12. My translation.
- 6 Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard and Sandrine Lemaire, 'Introduction: la fracture coloniale: une crise française', in Bancel et al. (eds), *La Fracture coloniale*, p. 30. My translation. This is a reference to Eric Conan and Henry Rousso's *Vichy: un passé qui ne passe pas*, a study of 1990s representations of the Occupation in France, published in English as *Vichy: an Ever-Present Past* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1998).
- 7 Bancel et al., 'Introduction', p. 18. My translation.

of amnesia'.⁴ In fact, these amnesties only assured the return of those traumas they repressed: 'Memory has crossed the sea, so that everything that was not resolved in Algeria is now reappearing in France'.⁵ A new name has recently been given to this crossing over of memory from Algeria then to France now: that of *la fracture coloniale* or the colonial schism. In 2005 a collection of essays was published under that title as a response to the ongoing haunting of French society by its colonial past. Like the Vichy syndrome before it, *la fracture coloniale* is *un passé qui ne passe pas* [a past which cannot pass],⁶ a past which cannot be overcome and which is under a process of renegotiation and selective remembering. Witness the controversial law of 23 February 2005, Article 3 of which required that 'School syllabi recognize in particular the positive role of the French presence overseas, especially in North Africa'. In their introductory essay, the editors of *La Fracture coloniale* trace this revisionism back to the mid 1990s and notably to President Chirac's celebration on 11 November 1996 of 'the importance and the richness of France's achievement over there, of which it is proud'.⁷ In tandem with this emphasis on the positive is a continuing reluctance to address the negative consequences of colonialism, and a hysterical reaction to manifestations of cultural or racial difference such as the 'affaire de Creil' of 1989 and the subsequent polemics surrounding the headscarf. It is in this context of fear, of hauntings, of repressed memories and of renegotiated meanings pertaining to the French colonial project in Algeria, that *Caché* will be explored.

In addition to these issues of context, I shall consider the film in terms of trauma theory, especially insofar as it concerns the visualization of trauma. Deriving for the most part from critical engagement with testimony of the Holocaust, and to a lesser extent from debates regarding narratives of abuse, trauma theory has developed principally in the USA over the last two decades. It has contributed to what some see as the return of the body, of emotion, and potentially also of politics, to the domain of theory from whence these concerns had been exiled by deconstruction: 'Was deconstruction a screen that masked emotion and the body – aspects of life that trauma theory helped to reintroduce?'.⁸ From Shoshana Felman's and Dori Laub's groundbreaking book *Testimony* onwards,⁹ trauma theory has tended to concentrate on the notion of bearing witness. In her recent work *Trauma Culture*, Kaplan describes witnessing as the production of 'a deliberate ethical consciousness', implying a 'framework that has to do with public recognition of atrocities'. Writing in part as a reaction to 9/11, E. Ann Kaplan establishes the concept of the 'vicarious trauma' experienced by the reader or the viewer when confronted with trauma narratives, and seeks to distinguish between the effect of witnessing, which 'involves not just empathy and motivation to help, but understanding of the structure of injustice', and what she terms the 'empty empathy', which tends to be 'elicited by images of suffering provided without a context or background knowledge'.¹⁰

- 8 E. Ann Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: the Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), p. 35.
- 9 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (London: Routledge, 1992).

10 Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, pp. 122, 22, 93.

11 Cathy Caruth, 'Trauma and experience: introduction', in Caruth (ed.), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 8.

12 Ruth Leys, *Trauma: a Genealogy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 2. Italics in original.

13 Thomas Elsaesser, 'Postmodernism as mourning work', *Screen*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2001), p. 195. Such films include Philippe Faucon's *La Trahison* (2006), Laurent Herbiet's *Mon Colonel* (2006) and to some extent Rachid Bouchareb's World War II drama *Indigènes* (2007).

14 Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, p. 69.

15 Ibid., p. 68.

16 Cathy Caruth, 'Literature and the enactment of memory', in Lisa Saltzman and Eric M. Rosenberg (eds), *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), p. 214. Italics in original.

In her own theory of trauma, Cathy Caruth replaces the Freudian term 'repression' with the phrase 'inherent latency' in order to stress the time delay in operation within traumatic experience: 'since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time'.¹¹ Although not in agreement with Caruth's theory as a whole, Ruth Leys has observed that there is a strand within what she calls the 'genealogy of trauma', according to which trauma 'refuses to be represented *as past*, but is perpetually reexperienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present'.¹² Thomas Elsaesser's suggestion, that 'accepting the latency hypothesis as significant for trauma' might explain the 'nature of the delays' behind the making of films on the Holocaust, might also be applied to the recent, belated glut of French films on the Algerian War.¹³ Certainly we can observe a sense of latency, a temporal and spatial shift, a reexperiencing of the past as present, in the reappearance of traumas from the Algerian War outside the boundaries of that conflict in the films under analysis here: in the Tunisian refugee camp of *J'ai 8 ans* (which I discuss below) and in the postcolonial Paris of *Caché*. Both films can also be seen to illustrate Kaplan's assertion of 'the match between the visuality common to traumatic symptoms (flashbacks, hallucinations, dreams) and the ways in which visual media like cinema become the means through which a culture can unconsciously address its traumatic hauntings'¹⁴ – although the extent to which each film's engagement with postcolonial trauma remains unconscious is debatable.

In *Caché*, the protagonist Georges (Daniel Auteuil) embodies the denial that has operated within French society in regard to Algeria. He is an allegorical figure whose personal demons represent the cultural phenomenon of *la fracture coloniale*, a personification of Kaplan's view that 'the impact of past crimes in a nation-state may evidence itself in the form of "cultural symptoms" analogous to those in individuals'.¹⁵ Georges incarnates postcolonial France: guilty, in denial, fearful, yet also powerful and violently assertive. As Haneke has suggested in interview, it really does not matter who is terrorizing Georges and his family. Even if Majid (Maurice Bénichou) were responsible, it would not change Georges's guilt. Moreover, if we wish we can interpret not just the tapes but the drawings, Majid's suicide and even the unwelcome appearance of Majid's son at Georges's place of work as manifestations of the latter's guilt: fantasies or phantoms that haunt him with reminders of 1961.

Caruth has proposed that certain films, such as Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959), display 'a seeing and a listening *from the site of trauma*'.¹⁶ This is a rare phenomenon, however, especially with regard to French cinema when the 'site of trauma' is Algeria. Even those French films that return to Algeria, like Bertrand Tavernier's and Patrick Rotman's documentary *The Undeclared War/La Guerre sans nom* (1992), do so in the name of French veterans, not Algerians. In *Caché* the site of the trauma is ironically far from Algeria, on a farm in *la France profonde* [rural France], where Georges grew up and from whence Majid

17 See Haneke, interviewed by Serge Toubiana for the DVD release of the film.

18 Cited in Janet Walker, 'The traumatic paradox: autobiographical documentary and the psychology of memory', in Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (eds), *Contested Pasts: the Politics of Memory* (New York, NY and London: Routledge, 2003), p. 108.

19 Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, 'Introduction: contested pasts', in *ibid.*, p. 7.

20 Cited in Walker, 'The traumatic paradox', p. 108.

21 Beugnet, 'Blind spot'; Elizabeth Ezra and Jane Sillars, 'Hidden in plain sight: bringing terror home', *Screen*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2007), pp. 215–21.

is removed, to find that his only place in French society is firstly an orphanage and subsequently the *banlieue*. It is this scene of origins lost and remembered (October 1961, the disappearance of Majid's parents, his rejection by Georges, the splitting of one from another that mirrors how postcolonial French society structured itself on racial lines) which recurs in Georges's nightmares. The site of trauma is the origin of Georges's guilt, of which Haneke has stated, '*ça devient un traumatisme parce qu'il ne veut pas reconnaître la culpabilité*' [it becomes a form of trauma because he doesn't want to acknowledge any guilt].¹⁷ It is also the moment when witnessing is split, between Georges (whose nightmares are as fantastical as they are traumatic) and Majid (whose trauma is only briefly but bloodily represented in the drawings and his own suicide). This reflects the 'splitting of eyewitnessing' that Felman and Laub identify in testimony on trauma.¹⁸ It also reflects *la fracture coloniale* within the fabric of contemporary French society.

Haneke's *Code Unknown/Code inconnu* (2000) is a film about fear, an emotion acted out by a deaf child in the opening sequence. *Caché* also concerns fear, notably the fear of the ethnic other, but it is primarily a film about guilt. Hence its resonance for trauma theory, which 'aims precisely to summon up the presentness of memory, to insist on unfinished business: guilt and reparation'.¹⁹ Although there is no sign in *Caché* of reparation or closure (dismissed by Haneke as mainstream fabrications), interwoven through the film is a series of images by which guilt is visualized: the videotapes, but also the childlike drawings, as well as the nightmares and flashbacks that haunt Georges. While for Felman and Laub a traumatic event 'without a witness' such as the Holocaust 'radically annihilates the recourse (appeal) to visual corroboration', in *Caché* it is precisely the 'visual corroboration' of a trauma by the two witnesses concerned that is at stake.²⁰ This visualizing of (Georges's) guilt as trauma – as well as the visualizing of (Majid's) suffering as trauma – is in clear contrast to Haneke's approach in *Code inconnu*. In the earlier film, the suffering of the tortured child who lives next door to Anne is only represented obliquely: by the cries coming through the walls, by her (unseen) note asking for help, and then, with devastating and matter-of-fact speed, by her funeral. *Caché*, on the other hand, is a film about the visual traces left by trauma.

It is no surprise that the images that have generated the most discussion in accounts of the film have been the videotapes. (Again, see the recent *Screen* dossier, in particular the essays by Beugnet and by Elizabeth Ezra and Jane Sillars.)²¹ Haneke's mastery of film form here, his questioning of the ontological status of what we see in order to maintain the unease and rising tension at the heart of the thriller genre, is undoubtedly brilliant. By raising insistent doubts as to whose point of view we are sharing, Haneke creates from the very first sequence to the open ending a disorienting crossover between reading the images before us as subjective or objective. He thus produces a kind of abject and fascinating cinema, wavering between the point of view of the subject

22 Yann Tobin, 'Caché: tel est pris...', *Positif* (October 2005), p. 19. My translation.

23 Jean-Pierre Rehm, 'Juste sous la surface', *Cahiers du cinéma* (October 2005), p. 31. My translation. See also Mark Cousins, 'After the end: word of mouth and *Caché*', *Screen*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2007), pp. 223–6.

24 Bancel et al. (eds), 'Introduction', p. 24. My translation.

and the object. But there may be other reasons why so much has been said about the tapes and their authorship at the expense of the drawings, the nightmares or Majid's suicide. Critical reception of *Caché* in France, Britain and America has tended to stress film form rather than postcolonial trauma. *Positif* championed the film as 'a reflection on the image and its manipulation', while neglecting to mention Algeria even once.²² While the review in *Cahiers du cinéma* did acknowledge two strands within *Caché*, one concerning history and the other the image, it declared that the brutal impact of the film lay not in the first of these strands but in the second, and notably in 'the question of knowing *who* shot the tapes'.²³ This tendency towards formalism while downplaying or ignoring the film's concern with French history could be said to derive from 'the crisis of national identity and the difficulty in integrating the colonial episode into our collective representations, which is linked to the difficulty in thinking through the question of difference'.²⁴

Although menacing because of the threat they seem to represent, the tapes are empty of content. Their message within the diegesis is simple: someone is watching you. The drawings have an entirely different function. They visualize the trauma that Georges has denied for his entire adult life, they reawaken a sense of guilt long repressed. It is the drawings rather than the tapes that provoke Georges's nightmarish flashbacks, a mixture of memory and fantasy that returns him to the events of October 1961. With the second videotape comes the first drawing, a childlike image of a face vomiting blood. Georges's troubled reaction is directed at the drawing rather than the tape. Its intimate connection with his own identity is hinted at by the use of a rare closeup to show his hand holding the picture, a shot that is repeated on the discovery of the fourth and final drawing (the dying cockerel). This drawing also provokes the first flashback of the film: a tiny fragment that flashes across the screen as Georges recalls or imagines a glimpse of the face of a young boy (later decoded as that of the young Majid). The second and third drawings, arriving through the post and without any accompanying tape, both show a child with a body as well as a head, keeling over and again vomiting blood. Although the full explanation comes much later in the film, even at this early stage in the narrative the editing points towards a particular trauma: one concerned with race and memory. Hence the receipt of the second drawing is immediately followed by Georges's aggressive confrontation with the black cyclist, as if the ethnic other (up until this point absent from the film) had erupted into his consciousness like the return of the repressed. And the arrival of the third drawing is followed by another and slightly longer flashback, a childhood fantasy, that shows a child (Majid) coughing up blood in a dark room. The drawings thus trigger the return of the traumatic event. Georges's fear of Majid is later figured in another flashback which shows a nightmarish vision of Majid killing the cockerel and then approaching Georges as if to consume him; again, the core memory here is distorted by fantasy, fear and guilt, so that Majid is represented as a threat and a dark, obliterating force.

25 Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, p. 43.

26 Didier Lapeyronnie, 'La banlieue comme théâtre coloniale, ou la fracture coloniale dans les quartiers', in Blanchard et al. (eds), *La Fracture coloniale*, p. 210. My translation.

27 I would therefore disagree with Paul Gilroy's assertion that the suicide makes Majid invisible and only 'communicates about Georges'. See Paul Gilroy, 'Shooting crabs in a barrel', *Screen*, vol. 48, no. 2 (2007), p. 234.

In *Trauma Culture*, Kaplan cites Janet Walker's observation that the most effective trauma films are those 'that figure the traumatic past as meaningful yet fragmentary, virtually unspeakable'.²⁵ One can apply this argument to *Caché* and to the fragmentary nature of Georges's memories/nightmares, perplexing glimpses of which punctuate the narrative. But what remains almost entirely unspoken, a structuring absence at the heart of the film, is the trauma suffered by Majid. The drawings and the flashbacks in this sense represent a shared trauma, one that Georges experiences as guilt but Majid as suffering. This suffering remains as invisible to Georges as it is to French society at large, for Majid has been displaced from both his own family (murdered in 1961) and Georges's family (who first welcome and then reject him) and is hidden at the margins, in a council block. Majid's dingy flat in the *banlieue* reminds us that this suburban zone has been memorably described as 'a colonial space' where the inhabitants 'experience life as "the colonized"'.²⁶ The trauma continues for Majid – or, if we follow Caruth's 'latency' theory, is only fully experienced by him – in the pseudo-colonial universe of the *banlieue*. It is here that his suicide takes place, a suicide which is in a sense the final drawing, the final visual trace of the trauma initiated in 1961. Both actions (drawing, suicide) involve making visible the trauma inside, taking what has been internalized and revealing it, through the splashes of red blood seen in the drawings or on the wall above Majid's corpse.²⁷ Where in the drawings blood spurts from the neck of the cockerel, in the suicide scene (surely the most traumatizing for the viewer, and deliberately so, although rarely evoked in accounts of the film's form) an almost identical visualization of trauma is presented by the death of a man.

As we have seen, childhood experience is central to representations of trauma in *Caché*. The same is true of a little-known but important example of testimony regarding childhood trauma from the Algerian War, Yann Le Masson's and Olga Poliakoff's documentary short *J'ai 8 ans* (1961). Shot secretly in a Tunisian refugee camp during the war, the film gathers together oral and visual testimony from half a dozen children (all boys) who witnessed the conflict firsthand. A narrative of trauma and flight structures the film, which is told by the boys over images of their own pictures and drawings: they witness the killing of family members by French soldiers; they are rescued by the Front de Libération Nationale; after a gun battle they walk to the border and into Tunisia, where for some there is a reunion with relatives. It is interesting, given the emphasis that trauma theory places on latency and belatedness, that the film takes the children's experiences and narrativizes them so soon after the event (while the conflict is still ongoing), although importantly it does so in a different place (Tunisia). One might see the children's visual and oral representation of their suffering as illustrative of the Caruthian trend within trauma theory, whereby 'the overcoming or mastery of trauma must involve "integration" and "assimilation"'. Foremost among

28 Elsaesser, 'Postmodernism as mourning work', p. 196. For a further gloss on Caruth's notion of trauma as 'non-traces' recoverable as narrative, see Peter Thomas, 'Victimage and violence: *Memento* and trauma theory', *Screen*, vol. 44, no. 2 (2003), p. 203.

29 Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg, 'Introduction', in Saltzman and Rosenberg (eds), *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, pp. xi–xii.

these processes . . . would be narrative and the ability to tell a (one's) story.'²⁸

J'ai 8 ans is introduced by facial closeups of each boy in turn, staring at the camera. Initially shown in black and white, these images return in colour to punctuate the narrative. These shots are comparable to the facial closeups on the young Majid as he faces Georges in the nightmare sequences from *Caché*. The confrontation with the site of trauma, and with the children traumatized, which is the very purpose of *J'ai 8 ans*, is inverted in Georges's synthesis of memory and dream and thus turned into a threat, according to which he becomes the victim rather than the aggressor, a stance reiterated in his subsequent reactions to Majid, Majid's son and the black cyclist. In *J'ai 8 ans* there is no such revisionism. The violent images from the first part of the film show, with simple matter of factness, the experience of war at the hands of the French. Certain of these images prefigure the childlike drawings in *Caché*. Thus we see a prone body with blood pouring from it as a witness recalls 'they killed'. Another drawing shows a man bleeding as he is stabbed in the head while a witness says one must be careful of French soldiers. A boy's account of his father's murder is illustrated by a simple picture of a body on the ground, half obliterated by huge red X. This recording of the traumatizing effect of the conflict on Algerians is precisely what is missing from Georges's perspective in *Caché*, and indeed from several critical readings of Haneke's thriller. However, it haunts both protagonist and film in the form of the bloody drawings and Majid's bloody suicide.

Surprisingly little has been written in trauma theory on the role of children's drawings as visual testimony, despite the fact that 'The formulation of trauma as discourse is dependent upon metaphors of visibility'. Even a recent collection which takes issue with trauma literature's insistence on 'the domain of language as opposed to the visual' makes no mention of children's drawings.²⁹ This seems all the more surprising given the centrality of children as witnesses to traumatic events such as the Holocaust or sexual abuse, or indeed the Algerian War – as evidenced not just by *J'ai 8 ans* but also by several of the case studies recounted by Frantz Fanon at the end of his 1961 anticolonial masterpiece *Les damnés de la terre/The Wretched of the Earth*. One explanation might be that trauma theory often concerns the testimony of adults, such as survivors of genocide or of abuse, even if they experienced the trauma as children. The 'inherent latency' that Caruth identifies may contribute to this slippage from childhood trauma to adult expression. Another reason might be the close relation between children's visual testimony and art therapy. Art is currently used by UNICEF throughout the world as a means towards the psychosocial rehabilitation of traumatized children: for instance, in Algeria during the recent civil war of the last fifteen years or so UNICEF has funded activities such as drawing alongside group play, theatre and sport. Artistic activities offer traumatized children the opportunity 'to tell their

30 Bo Nylund, Jean-Claude Legrand and Peter Holtsberg, 'The role of art in psychosocial care and protection for displaced children', *FMR*, 1999. URL: www.fmreview.org/text/FMR/06/05.htm [accessed 1 March 2006]. The same applies to non-verbal communication in music, dance, drama and puppetry.

31 The authorship of the drawings (like that of the tapes) is never resolved in the film. They are only ever referred to as childlike, and the question of who drew them, and when, remains unanswered. The formal similarity between Majid's suicide and the scenes depicted in the drawings does, however, establish a very strong link between the two and suggests forcefully that they represent his own trauma dating from 1961.

stories and to be heard and acknowledged'. As such, art provides 'a way to end isolation'. Through drawing and painting in particular, 'children can express emotions which are too difficult to express verbally, and other people can see what they are feeling'.³⁰ Hence children's drawings are often conceptualized as belonging to the realm of therapy rather than constituting objects of cultural study within trauma theory. It is to be hoped, however, that the impact of *Caché* and its powerful visualization of trauma via childlike drawings – albeit in a fictionalized and qualified sense³¹ – may result in trauma theory engaging more fully with this means of testifying to traumatic experience, whether in the French context of *la fracture coloniale* or in relation to other national cultures.

Hamid Dabashi (ed.), *Dreams of a Nation: on Palestinian Cinema*. New York, NY and London: Verso, 2006, 213 pp.

Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World*. New York, NY and London: IB Tauris, 2006, 242 pp.

Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: a Political History*. New York, NY and London: IB Tauris, 2006, 303 pp.

SHOHINI CHAUDHURI

At the start of the twenty-first century, Middle Eastern politics have penetrated the global imagination and claimed media attention as never before. But while in the films and narratives of others the region's inhabitants are often exoticized or demonized in orientalist fashion as terrorists or religious fundamentalists, Middle Eastern cinemas engage with their politics rather differently, as these three books testify, all of them firmly situating the region's cinemas on the map of 'world cinema'. Thus they offer not only important reflections on what is politically at stake in cinematic representation but also a provocative dialogue with international affairs that is rare in film scholarship.

In *Dreams of a Nation*, a collection of essays by scholars and filmmakers (including Michel Khleifi and Nizar Hassan), Dabashi has produced a valuable archive on Palestinian cinema, unlike any other. Its publication follows a Palestinian film festival of the same name, held in New York in January 2003, and the setting up of a project dedicated to screening and providing information on Palestinian cinema.¹ Opening with Edward Said's keynote address at the festival, the book clearly sets out its agenda: given the Zionist ideology of 'a people without a land' laying claim to 'a land without a people', the Palestinian struggle has, from the outset, been concerned with 'the desire to be visible' (p. 2). In the volume as a whole, cinema is seen as a crucial cultural expression of

¹ *Dreams of a Nation*. URL: <http://www.dreamsofanation.org> [accessed 14 August 2007].

Palestinian resistance – against dispossession, denial and erasure, on the one hand, and a stereotyped media identity, on the other. A key theme is how ‘a stateless nation generates a national cinema’ – a paradox that, as Dabashi comments, both facilitates and problematizes the idea of ‘national cinema’ (p. 7).

Indeed, as well as intersecting with current theoretical debates, this paradoxical status of Palestinian cinema produces all sorts of perplexities for its filmmakers. The documentarist Nizar Hassan offers an amusing anecdote about his tribulations after being invited to screen his film *Ijtiyah/Invasion* (2003) at an international independent film and television conference organized by Input. Since Input did not recognize Palestine, Hassan was automatically assigned ‘a special representative’ for his film’s country of origin – namely, the Rest of the World. Thereafter, he received a message rectifying this ‘mistake’ by placing his film under the category of ‘Israel’; Hassan wrote a furious letter of complaint. Input obliged by returning his film to its former category although, when the final conference list appeared, it was bizarrely classified under Afghanistan!

Annemarie Jacir, filmmaker and curator of the New York festival, gives an account of the difficulties she encountered in its organization. Due to military checkpoints around every Palestinian town or village, restricting both freedom of movement and social/institutional connections, together with the various levels of curfew imposed on Palestinians in the Occupied Territories, it was a major feat physically to obtain videotapes of the films and have them posted to New York. From Palestinian filmmakers’ perspective, borders are ‘a concrete reality rather than a theoretical problem’, as Omar al-Qattan puts it in his chapter, which discusses the problem of dependency on European funding and markets that divorces Palestinian filmmakers from their audiences in Palestine, where neither investment funds – apart from the Israeli Film Fund, which Palestinian filmmakers have occasionally utilized – nor distribution channels exist (p. 110).

Alongside these statements by filmmakers, which illuminate the problems of categorization, funding and distribution of national/transnational cinemas discussed by film theorists, there are essays documenting the history of Palestinian filmmaking and the work of specific directors. Joseph Massad charts the vicissitudes of Palestinian film history, from its pedagogical, documentary origins (funded by the PLO) to the rise of independent filmmakers (largely relying on international funding). He defines the *Nakba* (‘the Catastrophe’ of 1948 – the loss, dispossession and disenfranchisement suffered by Palestinians upon the creation of the State of Israel) as the ‘foundational trauma’ of Palestinian cinema. Due to its ‘unrepresentability’, it rarely forms the subject of direct treatment, yet it has ‘structured Palestinian cinema all along’ (pp. 34, 43).

In his essay, Bashir Abu-Manneh gives detailed consideration to Michel Khleifi’s films – an oeuvre comprising both documentary and

- 2 Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

- 3 Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (London: Vintage, 1992), p. xxiv.

- 4 See Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Moreton-in-Marsh: Arris, 2003); Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 1998).

- 5 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: the Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).

fiction, often complexly interweaving the two – in order to address crucial questions of form. Hamid Naficy situates the work of Palestinian filmmakers such as Khleifi and Elia Suleiman within the global trend of exilic cinema which he has, elsewhere, called ‘an accented cinema’;² but reflects that Palestinian cinema forms a rare instance which is ‘structurally exilic’ as its conditions of production are either under ‘internal exile in occupied Palestine or under . . . displacement and external exile in other countries’ (p. 91). Ella Shohat mounts a critique of concepts of ‘nation’ and ‘national cinema’ by analyzing films such as *Measures of Distance* (Mona Hatoum, 1998) and *Homage By Assassination* (Elia Suleiman, 1992) which, ‘rather than evoke the longing for an ancestral home’, endorse ‘the process of recreating identity in the liminal zone of exile’ (p. 89). The savage irony, highlighted by Said,³ of how the Jews – themselves former victims – have become victimizers, of how injustices suffered by one people are being expiated by another, also runs through the collection, especially in Dabashi’s own essay, which focuses on Suleiman’s work. By exhorting readers to confront this predicament, and by documenting the images and stories of Palestinian filmmakers that are not widely seen or discussed, *Dreams of a Nation* proves to be an extremely politically-committed book.

Together with the cinemas of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Tunisia and Morocco, Palestinian cinema occupies an important place in Khatib’s *Filming the Modern Middle East*, which focuses on Arab and Hollywood filmmaking since 1980. While previous works have treated Hollywood representations of Arabs and Arab cinemas independently,⁴ this book’s major appeal lies in juxtaposing them, highlighting the representations of ‘the other side’ against Hollywood’s hegemonic narratives. The story that Khatib thus tells is nuanced, lucid and well-researched, showing how Hollywood and Arab cinemas portray historical events in ‘different, often contradictory’ ways (p. 4). In the Arab–Israeli conflict, for example, Palestinian resistance is represented sympathetically by Arab cinemas but largely as terrorism by Hollywood. Also, while Hollywood tends to conflate Islam with Islamic extremists, Arab cinemas not only carefully distinguish one from the other but also provide more psychologically complex, albeit equally condemnatory, treatments of Islamic fundamentalism. Khatib’s study moreover contrasts Arab cinemas with each other – revealing that the ‘Orient’ also creates ‘Others’, both internal and external to itself – and thus it extends Said’s critique of orientalism in illuminating ways beyond East/West dichotomies.

Although Khatib refers to industrial factors which have constrained Arab cinemas’ handling of Middle Eastern politics – such as censorship, a desire to win larger audiences, lower budgets and, in the case of Gulf States, a lack of film industries – her study is devoted mainly to thematic issues. A key theme is that of space, which Khatib, drawing on the work of Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja,⁵ discusses as a social product which

cinemas construct in different ways. Therefore, while Hollywood's conception of space has to do with mastery – with its use of surveillance technologies to 'map' territory, including overhead travelling shots of desert landscapes, reflecting the USA's approach to Middle Eastern politics from 'above' – Arab films focus on lived-in, mostly interior or domestic spaces and more localized conflicts (p. 16). In the latter, space is the foreground rather than the background stage upon which conflicts are played out.

Khatib goes on to explore how films mobilize gender as a tool of nationalism: in different ways, Arab cinemas have symbolized their nations (and, in the case of Egypt, also its popular enemies, Israel and the USA) through female imagery such as the virgin/whore dichotomy, while Hollywood has favoured male images of the US nation (global policeman as virile conqueror/rescuer and, more recently, as 'new man') and figures its Arab enemies as dangerous yet effeminate men, making the representation of masculinities integral to the conflict. Although locating her work within a broadly postcolonial perspective, Khatib takes issue with postcolonial theory and its application to the Palestinian condition since, according to her argument, the Palestinians remain under colonial occupation by what is mainly a settler community; theirs is an *anticolonial* struggle. She contends that Hollywood distorts this situation by casting the Palestinian–Israeli conflict as a form of ethnic rivalry, glorifying the USA as peace mediator and downplaying Israeli oppression of Palestinians. While not exempt from self-glorification and vilification of 'others', Egyptian portrayals of the conflict, on the other hand, clearly represent Israel as the aggressor, but disregard Egypt's official peace treaty with Israel, in order to appeal to popular Arab sentiment. In short, in contrast to Hollywood's homogenizing of all Arabs (indeed, sometimes additionally non-Arabs, such as Iranians) into one monolithic identity ('us' versus 'them'), Khatib's book describes the multifaceted images of Arab societies in Arab films and, also, themes of inter-Arab differences and divisions. It offers a theoretically sophisticated understanding of the relations between history and representation, and subtle close readings – a finely-grained account of a shrewdly-defined topic.

Hamid Reza Sadr's *Iranian Cinema: a Political History* challenges the dominant trend of writing on Iranian cinema, which has focused on the 'poetic realist' films acclaimed at international film festivals in the 1980s and 1990s. Devoting a chapter to each decade, he presents a chronological survey of Iranian cinema that offers a glimpse into the diversity of Iranian films, including the generally overlooked mainstream films that form the bulk of domestic production. Although some of this rich cinematic history has been introduced to English-language readers before,⁶ Sadr's book-length study is aimed at a wider readership. According a central place to Iran's domestic politics and international relations – explicitly viewed as the historical background against which

⁶ See, for example, Hamid Naficy, 'Iranian cinema', in Oliver Leaman (ed.), *Companion Encyclopaedia of Middle Eastern and North African Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 130–222.

films are made and which they 'reflect' – also distinguishes his account from others.

This approach affords key insights into how politics and cinema in Iran have been intertwined through time. From the days of the Qajar Dynasty, the film industry has been the object of state interference, with the clergy playing a determining role – in 1904, the opening of Tehran's first commercial cinema immediately led to its closure and the imposition of a *fatwa* upon this 'ungodly' medium (p. 9). Using contemporaneous accounts, Sadr reconstructs the history of the multi-tiered state censorship of cinema in Iran – necessitating permits at various stages of production, distribution, and exhibition – much of which has roots in the Pahlavi era (1925–79) before the Islamic Republic.

One of the richest chapters deals with the 1950s, a crucial period when Muhammad Reza Shah sought to consolidate his power and tensions grew among his opponents. Sadr shows how, after the attempted coup in 1953 and attempted assassination of the Shah in 1958, the new regime, bolstered by the notorious secret service known as SAVAK, tightened censorship and made it even harder for films to turn against the ruling ideology, hence the production of pseudo-historical epics emphasizing themes of king and land. But the era's most popular films were romances and melodramas depicting the emergence in society of the 'new woman' who challenged patriarchal tradition. Family melodramas set into opposition 'two different types of Iranian women – traditional and modern – reflecting a permanent tension between the Pahlavi state and the Shi'a establishment' (p. 78). Sadr emphasizes the importance of female stars in the 1950s – although circumscribed by 'type', they were 'more colourful' than their male counterparts and the focus of public debate (p. 84). He also deals with themes of cross-dressing that emerged in this decade, providing Iranian audiences with 'a momentary transgression of society's accepted boundaries' in a strictly gender-segregated society (p. 86). All this provides an interesting foil and background to the representation of women in the internationally known Iranian cinema of the 1990s to the present, to which themes of cross-dressing and centrality of female stars have returned.

Throughout the book, Sadr pays attention to genre, including the *luti* crime films of the 1960s, the iconography of costume (for example, the symbolism of western clothes and hats and the compulsory unveiling of women during Reza Khan's rule), and stars (including the shift from stars to anti-stars during the first two decades of the Islamic Republic, when child actors became prominent). He concludes his volume with the filmmaking ventures of Iranian directors in Afghanistan, before and after 11 September 2001 and the US-led invasion – including films dealing with the displacement of Afghan refugees into Iran. In addition, Sadr discusses the Iranian-influenced *Osama* (Siddiq Barmak, 2003), the first Afghani feature to be made in the post-Taliban era, and the Iranian-Kurdish film *Lakposhta ham Parvaz Mikonand/Turtles Can Fly* (Bahman Ghobadi, 2004), which takes place in a refugee camp on Iraq's

- 7 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Turkish border on the brink of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. Although lightly referenced, this will undoubtedly be a valuable book, urging readers to view Iranian cinema as steeped in topical politics.

Together, these books provide refreshingly different angles on familiar debates and point to further, growing areas of research on Middle Eastern cinemas – such as the power dynamics of transnational distribution and funding, and the rise of Kurdish cinema. What they share, also, is a critique of power – most obviously, of the distorting and power-serving images that frequently represent the Middle East and its inhabitants in western media and political debate, but also of conventional film histories that have not given Arab or mainstream Iranian cinemas due attention. Likewise all the books, implicitly or explicitly, constitute reflections on the category of ‘national cinema’ and its claim upon the cinemas under discussion – including Sadr’s book which touches upon the cinema of the Kurds, one of Iran’s many ethnic minorities, which belongs – like Palestinian cinema – to a nation without a state. In giving voice to relatively underrepresented bodies of world cinema, what these books tender is not merely a record of the past but, as Derrida remarked of the archive in general,⁷ a pledge for and token of the future.

Richard Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and 'Movie-Mad' Audiences, 1910-1914*. Berkeley, CA and London: University of California Press, 2006, 373 pp.

MARK GLANCY

It is now hard to imagine a time when American films did not dominate in the global exhibition market, and harder still to imagine a time when, walking down Main Street, USA, one might find French, Italian and even British films routinely playing in the largest cinemas. Richard Abel's research reminds us that this was indeed the case at the beginning of the last century, and he convincingly explains why this era of internationalism was already on the wane well before the outbreak of World War I. In an earlier book, Abel argued that films made by the French company Pathé 'ruled the roost' of US exhibition in the middle of this period;¹ by 1907, for example, Pathé sold twice as much film footage in the USA as all of the American companies combined.² Moreover, the films were widely popular and highly regarded. They fuelled the growth of the nickelodeon boom and thus played a key role in the expansion of US cinema. By the end of the decade, however, Pathé's films were increasingly disadvantaged by both institutional and discursive practices, which promoted domestically-made films and 'marginalized and/or stigmatized' foreign films.³ At this time of mass immigration from southern and eastern Europe, Abel argues, 'making cinema American' was a key aspect of the wider, nativist project of Americanization.

These themes are taken up once again in the present volume, which covers the years 1910 to 1914 and demonstrates that this shorter period was a dynamic one, fully deserving of the intense scrutiny and analysis applied to it. Foreign films continued to play throughout the USA – and detailed evidence is offered of the release patterns and reception of high-profile films such as the French–British production of *Queen Elizabeth* (1912) and the Italian films *Dante's Inferno* (1911) and *Quo Vadis?*

¹ *The Red Rooster Scare: Making Cinema American, 1900-1910* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 48.

² *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

(1913) – but by this time foreign box-office hits were exceptional and illustrious films which reached US audiences by means of independent distributors, flexible exhibition practices and ‘road show’ releases. Domestic companies attempted to emulate these films with varying degrees of success, but they drew their strength from supplying everyday, domestic film fare through well-established distribution networks. In 1913, Abe Warner was able to claim that ‘American features, made in America by American actors and actresses, now have the call over those made abroad’ (p. 37). This was undoubtedly a self-serving rallying cry on behalf of Warner’s Features, but there is no doubt that US films were assuming a character of their own in this period. Abel investigates this most fruitfully by examining three genres (the thriller, the Western and the Civil War film) as well as the burgeoning star system. In each of these chapters, an impressive working knowledge of a wide variety of films is apparent; a lifetime of viewing would seem to have informed the concise plot summaries and the comparisons made between films. Furthermore, the films are discussed in relation to reviews, reports and promotional materials found in industry trade journals, fan magazines and newspapers. These are not unusual sources for the film historian, of course, but what is so remarkable here is the array of periodicals consulted. Extensive research using local newspapers, for example, allows Abel to follow the distribution, promotion, playing dates and critical reception of films well beyond major metropolitan areas, and into medium-sized, provincial cities throughout the northeast and midwest.

The stigmatizing of French films is most apparent in responses to the thriller. In the trade press and local newspapers, Abel finds a ‘culture war’ being waged against ‘sensational’ French thrillers and in favour of their ‘ethical’ US counterparts (pp. 186–7). While the latter are distinguished for their uplifting moral endings, and for focusing on the detection of crime rather than criminal activities, the former are criticized as too violent and morbid, especially for a genre that appealed to working-class audiences. Here, the desire to protect audiences from ‘alien’ influences neatly combines with a desire to support domestic producers. As Abel acknowledges, however, the battle lines were not always so clearly drawn, and moral and aesthetic judgements about the genre could be inconsistent, the success of Éclair’s *Zigomar* (1911) offering one instance of a French crime film that was admired. The Western and the Civil War drama, by contrast, offer examples of US producers finding their own feet, as they mobilized moments within a ‘usable past’ to make films that fit with emergent notions of national identity and a unique national character.

Trial and error figure prominently in the detailed accounts of the development of these genres. The Western had long been lauded for its fast action sequences, dramatic landscapes and cowboy heroes, but by 1911 some commentators were eager to declare the genre dead. Abel explains its resurrection as stemming from a number of factors.

The focus on performers such as Essanay's G.M. Anderson, who soon became known as 'Broncho Billy', was one. Another was increased running times, which allowed for more elaborate storylines and 'elevated' the genre above the level of the one-reel action drama. In some instances, the longer format, together with a growing interest in landscape and the use of historical stories, established the Western as a rival to Italian historical spectacles. These factors also demonstrated that the Western could serve as a vehicle for epic tales of the nation's development. As Abel succinctly puts it, films such as *War on the Plains* (1912) and *Battle of the Red Men* (1912) proved far more successful in 'establishing the basis for an American "national epic"' (p. 70) than other historical forays such as *The Coming of Columbus* (1912). Drawing on the work of Benedict Anderson, Abel notes that the Western served to bind American audiences into 'an imagined community of nationality'. He is also aware that the Western had a significant following abroad in 'constellated communities' which found their own meanings and relevance in the genre. Evidence of the genre's impact in Britain, France and Germany is uncovered, where the vigorous but easygoing cowboy was regarded as the definitive American character type, and Native-Americans served as the subjects of nostalgic, imperialist fascination (p. 115).

The Civil War film had less appeal abroad, but it flourished amid the 'golden jubilee' events that marked the fiftieth anniversary of the war (in the years 1911 to 1915). Earlier civil war dramas were more likely to sympathize with the victorious North, and not least because the North was the more lucrative exhibition market. In this period, however, they were produced in parallel with the historical pageants and battle reenactments that commemorated the war, and they formed a part of a 'culture of reunion' that was more sympathetic to the South (pp. 141–2). The 'usable past' of these films was one informed by the myth of the Lost Cause, with all of its racist and nostalgic elements, but many of the films also drew upon the narrative tradition of the 'girl spy'. This character type essentially feminized the South, and therefore made 'reunion culture' more acceptable to the North, but it also served as a vehicle for stories of resourceful women (p. 151). Indeed, the emergence of the New Woman is a theme that runs throughout the book, from the 'girl spies' of the Civil War films, to the 'young, active and independent' new female stars, and the consumers who could afford to attend films on their lunch break. If the emergence of the star system is, as Abel admits, a 'familiar enough' story (p. 231), he enhances our understanding of it by examining its earliest manifestations in local newspapers, where advertising, popularity contests and the new phenomenon of 'movie reporting' attest to its importance. With very few exceptions, the new 'picture personalities' were American performers and personality types, and their appeal was a crucial element in the Americanization of cinema.

This wide-ranging book also includes fascinating sections on nonfiction films, illustrated songs (as a part of film programmes), and the

4 Ibid., p. xiv.

relationship between films and newspapers. The scope of Abel's research and interests is impressive throughout. However, I did find myself wondering about the audiences referred to in the title. One does not have to fall back on romanticized notions of resistant and empowered spectators to seek some dissent from the concept of a cohesive national film culture. Were audiences actually 'Americanized' and 'movie-mad', or were they constructed as such by critical, fan and trade discourses? The sources with which that question might be answered probably do not exist, but the book's title led to me to expect more emphasis on specific audience responses. Also, if it is not quite as 'encyclopaedic' as a back-cover endorsement claims, that is because the book's format is not as orderly as that term implies. The use of conventional chapters alongside numerous reprinted documents and *entr'actes*, or shorter chapters, is meant to be analogous to 'a museum space or wonder cabinet' (as Abel explained in the preface to *The Red Rooster Scare*⁴), but it can at times seem more like a crowded storage space, in which the reader encounters artefacts that would benefit from greater illumination. Meanwhile, the author (or publisher) might have left room for a conclusion or epilogue. A book that covers so much ground, and presents such a wealth of evidence, should take more time to reflect, to summarize, and perhaps to look forward to the next phase. These may be trivial points, at odds with the author's goal of presenting a kaleidoscopic view, and they certainly do not constitute fundamental flaws. Abel has written an innovative, landmark account of the development of US cinema during a pivotal period in its history, and one that offers an insightful and exhaustively researched account of how and why US films developed an identity and appeal of their own.

Richard Dyer, *Pastiche*. New York, NY and London: Routledge, 2007, 222 pp.

STEVEN COHAN

Before reading Richard Dyer's new book, I had never thought of pastiche as being much more than a superficial aesthetic mannerism, a way of evoking outmoded forms of representation through stylistic imitation. Dyer, however, corrects such a commonplace yet limited understanding of the term. Pastiche, he argues, not only has a robust, lively and varied history in film, music, art and literature, but is a significant means of representing historicity in terms of feeling.

Dyer recognizes that pastiche is itself a loose term to start with; hence the difficulty in discerning it, let alone in identifying it categorically with the eye of a critic. The looseness, he explains, is semantic. 'Pastiche' is contiguous with many other terms for 'copying' and these are too often treated as its synonyms: plagiarism, forgery, hoax, homage, parody. To be sure, much like those other terms, pastiche involves imitation and is often readable as a straightforward and uncritical 'copy'. But pastiche does not imitate in the sense of achieving an exact reproduction; in contrast with, say, a plagiarism or a forgery, the point of a pastiche is not to be indistinguishable from its source. The term's looseness, furthermore, has to do with its origin in 'pasticcio', an Italian word that initially referred to a pie combining various ingredients yet without fully blending them together and hiding their distinctive flavours. From the perspective offered by the pasticcio's flavourful mixture, Dyer demonstrates how pastiche involves combination as well as imitation – or more precisely, it can readily and promiscuously combine imitations without regard to formal wholeness or generic unity. A text that pastiches can therefore be hybridic and heterogeneous, mixing modes, genres or styles; or it can set off what is being pastiched by framing it within a primary narrative that does not pastiche (as in the play within a play in

Hamlet or the ‘Follies’ numbers in the Sondheim musical *Follies*); or it can more seamlessly incorporate pastiche within another discourse (as in the free indirect style of Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*).

Equally, when combined with other styles, a pastiche can disappear from view once placed in new contexts of reception. It thus follows that ‘the form of a pastiche’s likeness is subject to perception’ on the part of the audience and the text alike (p. 55). To illustrate how a pastiche needs to be cued textually if not formally or risk the danger of misrecognition, Dyer points to the newsreel segment of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941); this is less discernible today as a pastiche (as opposed to a parody) of *The March of Time* (1930). Without clear-cut signalling, the attitudes expressed by a pastiche can consequently seem uncertain, its ‘point’ difficult to pin down. Yet when a pastiche is instantly recognizable as a ‘pastiche,’ the tendency amongst contemporary critics and reviewers, according to Dyer, is to dismiss the pastiche for its triviality, assuming that it intends only to amuse as a rhetorical flourish or to mark the past’s obsolescence in relation to the present.

The question of interpretability characterizes the terrain of pastiche. Dyer stresses that there is always a significant gap between a pastiche and what is being pastiched, between ‘likeness’ and ‘deformation and discrepancy’ (p. 54). This is not to say that the point of a pastiche is outright distortion but, rather, that it engages both resemblance and remembrance, exploiting their dynamic interaction. Inevitably, and usually intentionally, a pastiche brings into play a significant distance from its source as much as it approximates a sense of closeness to it, indicating why context and signals may be crucial. For insofar as ‘a pastiche imitates its idea of that which it imitates’ (p. 55), it refers back not to the source but to ‘perceptions [of the source] that are temporally and culturally specific’ (p. 128).

One of the ways that Dyer shows how cultural memory intervenes in and gives historical specificity to pastiche is through the revival of film noir. ‘What neo-noir imitates,’ he explains, using *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981) as his prime example, ‘is not straightforwardly noir but the memory of noir, a memory that may be inaccurate or selective’ (p. 124). Even more so than *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), at the time of its release *Body Heat* exemplified for reviewers and audiences how noir elements could be updated with considerable panache. The film was therefore seen as a superficial exercise in style on a par with retro fashion, and the critical consensus today still assesses it in these terms. Nonetheless, *Body Heat*’s pastiching of noir’s visual and narrative conventions was bound to its own historical moment: to view *Body Heat* as a noir pastiche enables one to recognize more sharply its significance in imitating not classic film noir but the critical definition of noir that had emerged after that cycle had run its course. So despite the seeming presence of 1940s film noir as the ostensible referent of its imitation, what is being pastiched in *Body Heat* is actually an ‘idea’ of what constituted noir. At once contemporaneous with the film’s production

and reception, that 'idea' of noir determined this film's fabric and attitudes. Furthermore, as an inaugurating instance of neonoir, the 'idea' of noir pastiched by *Body Heat* helped to shape the cultural memory of what 1940s film noir was 'actually' like, what emotions it generated and how it did so.

Dyer is by no means the first critic to offer this account of neonoir's historical relation to classic film noir, but he is the first to read it in terms of pastiche. 'Pastiche noir,' he states, 'is able to recognise and mobilise the structure of feeling it perceives to have been caught by classic noir' (p. 130). Dyer demonstrates how pastiche aesthetically expresses such historicity from a number of perspectives. He closes his book with a brief overview of what is no doubt the one example of cinematic pastiche that will most immediately occur to readers of this journal: *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002). Dyer describes his own response: 'there were moments when I could not see the screen for crying', even while 'I was fully conscious of the way the film was doing Hollywood melodrama, was pastiche' (p. 174). Enumerating upon the multiple ways in which this film situates its twenty-first-century viewers in an affective relation to what it is pastiching narratively, aesthetically and critically, Dyer concludes, 'the pastiche of *Far From Heaven* not only makes the historicity of its affect evident but can also allow us to realise the historicity of our feelings' (p. 178).

Dyer is not claiming that such a realization amounts to a pastiche's universality; far from it, since he wants to account for the strong affect that a pastiche like *Far From Heaven* can have upon a viewer without discounting its historical basis. His point is that, in imitating shared and historically contextualized perceptions of its referent, pastiche reveals the process by which feelings are culturally shaped, 'recognised and mobilised' by a work's style as much as by its content. This is also why affect alone does not necessarily stabilize or clarify the attitudes expressed by a pastiche, as other examples in these final chapters make fully apparent. For instance, Dyer audaciously, but also I think quite rightly, reads against the grain of the contemporary critical consensus about the appropriation of blackness by early twentieth-century Jewish composers (Irving Berlin and George Gershwin) and performers (Al Jolson). He points out 'the elements of distance that account for the pastiche quality of Jewish black music', which is 'music close to black, even on occasion mistaken for it, but never actually it and often signaling the fact' (p. 149). The uneasiness stirred by such musical pastiching – 'a highly ambivalent strategy of survival, expression and evasion' (p. 150) – becomes more undeniable and offensive once the framework of 'closeness and difference' historically recedes from view and 'the pastiche itself is revealed as problematic precisely because of its role in shoring up an unquestioned hegemonic cultural position' (p. 156).

Turning the question of distance around, Dyer then considers how the pastiching intent of *Madame Bovary* was in large part responsible for Flaubert's being charged with obscenity. Dyer speculates that the free

indirect style of the novel's narration, which pastiches 'the poetry of adultery' (p. 158) while obscuring the authorial stance towards the inflammatory romances that have filled Emma's head, encouraged and even justified the prosecutor's simplistic equation of Flaubert with his heroine. Why did Flaubert not take the safer road of distinguishing the pastiche from the authorial irony which more sophisticated readers sense, yet cannot assign to a specific agent because of the style? His 'using pastiche in the free indirect mode,' Dyer explains, '... allows us to experience the fiction and the response to it while simultaneously indicating its shallowness and showing its illusoriness. ... *Madame Bovary* suggests not just that pastiche can be used to be critical, but that it is precisely by drawing close to what it critiques that it is able to convey more forcefully why that needs to be critiqued, namely, because it works' (p. 163).

As I hope this review indicates, Dyer argues throughout his book that pastiche needs to be understood as the rhetorical expression of specific historical affects which apply to the present moment as much as they refer to the past. 'The most valuable point of pastiche', he reiterates, 'resides in its ability to move us even while allowing us to be conscious of where the means of our being moved come from, its historicity' (p. 138). His book forcefully challenges the debased status of pastiche as a trivial, ahistorical, and uncritical imitation which, especially because of Jameson's influence, now seems to determine the term's connotations. In order to show what such a limiting view ignores, Dyer further seeks to demonstrate how pastiche historically and emotionally identifies what amounts to a postmodern subject. 'Pastiche becomes here,' he comments when discussing Julian Barnes's 1984 novel *Flaubert's Parrot* in his final chapter, 'the feeling form of what at the level of theory is endless Derridean deferral or Butlerian performativity, the perception that everything in the end is a copy of something else and we know it and can never get out of it' (p. 173). In making this claim, Dyer is not invoking the philosophical trap of an infinite regress but, as he goes on to state in the last page of his book, stressing how 'pastiche articulates this sense of living permanently, ruefully but without distress, within the limits and potentialities of the cultural construction of thought and feeling' (p. 180).

Pastiche is clearly a compelling and learned book. Dyer writes with the flair, depth, and knowledge one expects from his many previous books, but here his scope is also more expansive, even more so than it was in *White* (1997). In examining pastiche, Dyer's range includes the novel, drama, and music as well as film, and his examples, not limited to English by any means, range from the Renaissance to the present day; nor are his illustrations confined to a single genre (the Western is here as well as melodrama and film noir) or medium. Regardless of what type of pastiching work he brings into his discussion, Dyer handles it with the same critical sophistication, attention to detail and intelligence that has always characterized his analysis of film.

Steve Chibnall, *'Quota Quickies': the Birth of the British 'B' Film*. London: British Film Institute, 2007, 329 pp.

LAWRENCE NAPPER

Steve Chibnall's exhaustive account of the 'quota quickie' is the first in a projected two-volume study of British 'B' pictures. The second, coauthored with Brian MacFarlane, will deal with the 1950s 'B' film and is due to appear shortly. The distinction between the 'quota quickie' and the 'B' film is, of course, an important one, as Chibnall takes pains to point out in his introduction. The term 'quota quickie' denotes a mode of production that is specific both to Britain and to the 1930s, and refers to films made at a minimal cost and with maximum speed for US distributors who needed cheap British product to fulfil their legal obligations under the 1927 Cinematograph Films Act. The Act stipulated that a certain percentage of films offered for distribution in Britain must be made in Britain, although the company funding such productions did not have to be British. US distributors commissioned a raft of small British companies to make films for them under punishing conditions of time and budget, and the results have long been held in contempt by critics and scholars as both unwatchable in themselves, and detrimental to the reputation of British cinema overall – an ironic consequence of legislation whose main purpose was to protect and enhance British filmmaking.

The term 'B' film derives from a mode of exhibition – the double feature – which developed in the 1930s, became standard across Britain and the USA, and survived into the postwar period. The double feature, argues Chibnall, had its origins in the speed of the transition from silent to sound cinema – a previously unreleased silent film being initially 'thrown in' to provide added value to the programmes of smaller cinemas struggling to compete with wealthier rivals. Soon the British audiences,

smarting under the economic difficulties of the early 1930s, came to expect the value for money a two-feature programme provided, and exhibitors and distributors were forced reluctantly to continue the practice. Double-feature programmes usually consisted of an expensive 'A' film coupled with a cheaper 'B' picture – although the terms 'A' and 'B' film had greater currency in the USA than in Britain, where they were usually termed 'first' and 'second' features. As Chibnall suggests, distributors attempted to determine the relative status of the films they offered, although they did not in fact have the last say about which film gained top billing. He provides a number of examples of incidents where the 'second' feature was so popular with audiences that individual exhibitors reversed the billing, making the poverty-stricken British film the main attraction. Nevertheless, as one might expect in a context where a considerable number of cheap British films were being distributed by US companies, it was generally the case that the quota quickies occupied secondary place in the double-feature programme.

Chibnall's book, then, provides a double history – firstly of the quota quickie industry itself, the personnel who worked within it and the films it produced, and secondly of the exhibition context which it fed. The range and depth of Chibnall's research is impressive. He draws extensively on contemporary sources, such as trade papers and fan magazines, providing an exemplary lesson in how rich such materials can be when properly used. I was particularly delighted to see the extent to which he has consulted the interviews conducted by the BECTU History Project, a hitherto rather under-used resource which hopefully will gain greater recognition as a result of the University of East Anglia's efforts to provide searchable online transcripts.

Chibnall's main argument concerning quota quickies essentially extends and elaborates on the tentative initial work done by Linda Wood and myself. Despite being funded by Hollywood distributors as little more than a tax writeoff, he suggests, these films had the freedom to represent a truly indigenous culture to British filmgoers. In contrast to the 'internationalist' productions of figures such as Korda and Balcon, quota pictures, which had no chance of being exported, were able to address British concerns more directly, drawing on theatrical and music-hall traditions, and producing films in a 'characteristically British idiom' (p.122). Furthermore, the feverish atmosphere of quickie production (with films being churned out in less than a fortnight, often within studios which filmed around the clock) provided an extraordinarily rich training ground for now-celebrated technicians, writers, actors and directors who otherwise would not have had the opportunity to break into the industry.

Chibnall gathers a wealth of material in support of these arguments, despite some rather daunting obstacles to research. Very few of the films survive, and his extensive survey of their generic and stylistic characteristics is largely gleaned from reviews and synopses. He proves himself extremely adept at handling massive volumes of such material and forging it into an entertaining and enlightening narrative, although it

is frustrating that even in his filmography he does not identify which of the films he has in fact been able to view. This matters, since I suspect that exaggerated reports of the awfulness of the films are partly a function of the fact that they make jolly good anecdotes for the 'my early struggle' sections of director autobiographies. The chapter on the actual conditions of quota production draws on many such stories, but maintains an elegant balance between entertainment and a more serious history of the producers and directors who struggled against formidable odds to produce films that would hold the audiences' attention. Chapters on the contemporary critical debate, and the relations between quickie producers and the BBFC ensure that the study is both thorough and sustained.

As Chibnall says, the quota sector operated both as a runway and as a landing strip, providing early experience for apprentice filmmakers such as Michael Powell and David Lean, but also offering employment to a large number of older filmmakers who had been major figures in the silent period – figures such as Henry Edwards, Guy Newell, Adrian Brunel, Graham Cutts and Maurice Elvey. Given Christine Gledhill's recent argument that 1920s British films operated in quite a distinctive representational mode which appears not to have survived the conversion to sound, a specific analysis of the quickies made by these men may have proved intriguing.¹ Instead Chibnall makes the rather more obvious choice of Powell for his detailed case study – perhaps the book's weakest moment. I have always found Powell's accounts of his own filmmaking rather tiresome and they are used extensively here. The whole 'the-script-was-so-beneath-me-I-decided-to-send-it-up' routine palls very quickly in this context, and Chibnall's suggestion that many of the films might be read as allegories of the quota industry is only really convincing with regard to *Red Ensign* (1934).

By contrast, the case-study of exhibition in Leicester is truly impressive. Chibnall is meticulous in mapping the cinemas of the city and analyzing the ways in which second features drawn from the quota were an instrumental part of the filmgoing experience, essential to the survival of independent and smaller cinemas. Indeed it is the small cinema manager who emerges as both the hero and the victim of this history – at the mercy of a fickle audience and powerful distributors, and having to compete with circuit cinemas who were able to cherry-pick the best both of the British and US releases. The small exhibitor had a vested interest in maintaining the double feature as a draw, even when the lower turnover of daily programmes it represented ate into his profits. His survival depended on his ability to sift through the review material from the trade papers (quoted so extensively in this book) in order to match his bookings to the particular tastes of his audience. On rare occasions that skill might transform a modest 'pound-a-footer' into a top-billing hit. Chibnall is particularly strong on the symbiosis between the quota quickie and the double-feature programme, arguing convincingly that the campaign against quickies in the run up to the 1938 Cinematograph

1 Christine Gledhill, *Reframing British Cinema 1918–1928: Between Restraint and Passion* (London: British Film Institute, 2003), pp. 31–59.

Films Act was motivated not by anxiety over the reputation of British cinema, but rather by a desire to revert to a single-feature programme, thus increasing the possible turnover of paying audiences in any given evening.

Chibnall's book is excellently researched, thoroughly comprehensive and entertainingly written. Its real strength, however, lies in the way it combines both a production and an exhibition history, making explicit the political, economic and artistic influences exerted by each upon the other.

George Kouvaros, *Where Does it Happen? John Cassavetes and the Cinema at Breaking Point*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, 264 pp.

JANET HARBORD

It is a curious situation that John Cassavetes is regarded as one of the most significant figures of his generation in underground American filmmaking, yet has attracted remarkably few sustained appraisals of his body of work. Kouvaros's study is therefore a timely meditation on the importance of Cassavetes in the history of alternative forms of film production, and for an understanding of his work at the intersection of historical discourses of film theory in national contexts. Conceived as a work of 'critical revision', there are numerous positions and reputations to rewrite, not least a recontextualization of Cassavetes's comments on his own practice. This study is peppered with citations from the filmmaker – a notoriously recalcitrant subject of critical attention – providing a flavour of his particular brand of commentary. 'When I make a film . . . I am more interested in the people who work with me than I am in the film itself, than I am in filmmaking', he comments in the wake of his early works, *Shadows* (1959) and *Faces* (1968). And in relation to film movements, Cassavetes's resistance to classification is plain: 'To tell the truth, I don't know what underground films are. . . . If your films have no chance of being shown everywhere, if you don't have enough money, you show them in basements; then they're underground films' (pp. 9–10). One has the sense that Cassavetes would have been a tricky interviewee, and not necessarily a commentator to be taken at face value.

The approach that Kouvaros takes is to engage the idiosyncrasies of Cassavetes's statements and life, and to draw a series of linkages between his biography and work. The statements are treated as potential inroads into the territory that Cassavetes works across, namely film and life, performance and being. That Cassavetes has been positioned as an auteur is for Kouvaros a loss, a way of shelving the difficulties that his work presents, suggesting a false unity of vision under the signature of

review

the author. A finer analysis reveals the contradictions at play in his work as an actor and director in Hollywood, a filmmaker on the margins of mainstream production but one whose work was nominated for Academy Awards, and a man who used his own friends and family to produce work that navigated the conjunction of film and life. The instability of the meaning of the term 'film' arises, for example, in his first low-budget feature, *Shadows*. First screened in 1958, the film was seen by Jonas Mekas, editor of *Film Culture* magazine, and championed as spontaneous cinema, vital in its immediacy. Mekas awarded *Shadows* the First Independent Film Award by the magazine. Yet Cassavetes remained dissatisfied with the film. Regarding the initial film as but one version of a project, he re-shot and re-edited parts of the film where the stylized camera techniques had become too prominent, suppressing the relations between characters. Infuriated by the revision, Mekas regarded the changes as an attempt to appeal to a more commercial culture and, explicitly, that everything that he had previously valorized was 'completely destroyed' (p. 10).

If Cassavetes managed to alienate film critics and scholars of his time, Kouvaros returns to the critical context of those decades to resituate the connections and discord with film theory. In a sense, Cassavetes appears as a figure out of synch with the debates and movements of his time. The films fail to chime with the post-May '68 agenda of film studies in journals such as *Screen*, *Camera Obscura*, *Wide Angle* and *Jump Cut*, in which a specific relation to Hollywood narrative cinema characterized the editorials. Kouvaros sketches a polarized intellectual landscape, one where prominence was given either to an ideological critique of classic Hollywood film (Sirk, Hitchcock, Ford), or to an emerging structuralist avant garde (Gidal, Rainer, Straub). The films of Cassavetes tend, in this account, to slip between the cracks. The exception to this situation occurs in France, in the redefinition of the agenda of *Cahiers du cinéma* in the early 1970s, which rejected an earlier emphasis on the auteur as the location of meaning and turned instead to the relation between film and the dominant ideological landscape. Unlike its UK and US counterparts, the journal maintained a commitment to Marxist scholarship and the need to map emerging contemporary cinema – including the films of Cassavetes. Referencing the landmark editorial of 1969 in *Cahiers du cinéma* by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni, Kouvaros identifies an opening up of critical possibilities for thinking through the ruptures and breaks with dominant ideological forms. In this broadening of perspective, there are two possibilities within the categories outlined by Comolli and Narboni that open out onto the films of Cassavetes. First is the emphasis on formally inventive films that may not appear political in content but become so through the experience of the film's form. Second, the importance of the development of Direct Cinema, which champions a move away from a model of revelatory disclosure towards a critique of representation.

This is an important contextualization that allows us to reread Direct Cinema and the films of Cassavetes together. Comolli places the work of

Cassavetes in the category of nonidealist, reflexive Direct Cinema, where the process of filming is seen to act upon the material it records, creating an endless cycle of influence. There is no reality to be discovered or represented, rather there is an accumulation of moments, an accumulation that Comolli attributes to *Faces* and the rounds of hysterical laughter, repeated jokes and physical gestures. From here, Kouvaros begins to detail the nature of performance in the films as a refusal of 'reality' outside of this construction, and a denial of the possibility of an essential identity laid bare. We are, in the viewing of these films, exposed to the vulnerable and fragile constructions of identity rather than revelations of an essential self. Here is Kouvaros on *Faces*:

Caught in spaces that restrict their movements, the characters respond by putting on a show. And what emerges as a result of this acting up is not the revelation of inner depths but the performance of particular anxieties about aging, the calcification of relationships, and the fear of death.' (p. 63)

In these readings of the films, the visceral discomfort of viewing a Cassavetes film is evoked and explained. *Faces* is an excruciating cinematic experience not because of the drunken ribaldry, but the acute vulnerability of watching identity in the making, the scrabbling together of a sense of self through repetitious acts, a mustering of identity that may or may not cohere as a subject or character. In these films, alcohol and cigarettes provide the atmosphere for this staging of the self at its most ebullient and desperate limit.

The refusal of a model of depth for identity applies also to the form of the film itself. Not a reproduction but a production, filmmaking is an event, a bringing into relation of parts that force an encounter. The films of Cassavetes are not a restaging, an imitation of life, but a particular form of event that is but another facet of life (rather than set apart from it). In this sense, Cassavetes shares an approach to cinema with Godard. For both, filmmaking is an exploration of what cinema can do, what relations it can bring into being, which situations and stories can be articulated with and for the viewer. The particularity of Cassavetes's process is given focus through three terms or tropes: surfaces, thresholds and durations. In the attention Kouvaros gives to surfaces, we have a sense of the limit of film. From *Faces*, we understand that the surface of the skin is all that we have to go on, in life and in film viewing. An expressive surface, the face is a series of signs to be deciphered, but one for which 'there is no clear-cut passage linking an inner emotional truth to its exposition in external gestures and affective performance' (p. 45). In the emphasis that Cassavetes places on thresholds, there is a similar indecisiveness at play in what is about to be embarked upon or abandoned. To walk through a doorway, Kouvaros notes, is always a difficult act for any character in any of these films. At the close of *Faces*, the husband and wife hover on the stairway, a threshold between rooms.

It is unclear whether this is the end of their relationship or the beginning of new chapter, or indeed whether this is a replay of a previous moment that will pass without any particular significance for the characters.

Cassavetes's treatment of cinematic duration is expressed as the witnessing of a dramatic time that allows resolution to drain away. The form of the film refuses any temporal framing in its display of 'redundant' time, that is, moments when the camera appears to run on after a scene has ended. This requires us to question what is dramatic, and what is open to filmic presentation. It also produces moments of identifiable instability where the ability to discern film from life, fiction from the real is made problematic. At the end of *Woman Under the Influence* (1974), for example, as the characters are cleaning up, we witness the empty moments that exist in the liminal space between performance and life, a space where the actors cross back into who they were before. Kouvaros thus gives us another way of thinking duration through these films, an effect amplified by the repeated use of the same actors, most notably his wife, Gena Rowlands. In the resonance of actors appearing across many films we also experience the vibration of other characters from other films. Accumulation occurs again here in an acknowledgement of the presence of an audience, situated in particular moments of viewing. In a reading of *Love Streams* (1984) Cassavetes's final film (although he was to become involved with one other film), there are the traces of previous films, other stories that have been told or have been occluded, giving the film a palimpsestic quality of temporal overwriting.

In this account, Kouvaros persuades us that Cassavetes's films operate in an open territory of experimentation that goes beyond improvisation. Cassavetes, Kouvaros suggests, offers cinematic performance at breaking point, where dramatic energy is summoned, allowed to go too far, and runs on into an unforeseeable scenario. There are connections with Artaud's physical theatre, where the body is allowed to take concrete expression and words are secondary. Kouvaros argues, 'those who partake in such a process are not at its centre, controlling or interpreting the performance, but find themselves subjected to an energy and power that carries them away' (p. 124). The force of energy and becoming, and the textures of duration, are fundamental to this study of Cassavetes, and it is curious that Kouvaros does not pay more attention the source of these concepts directly, in the work of Spinoza, Bergson and Deleuze. Whilst all are mentioned in the text, this appears to be little more than a fleeting gesture. Arguably, we could have benefited from a less persistent return to political modernism throughout the book, and a more explicit address to a philosophical tradition with which Cassavetes belatedly overlapped. But this is a book that works its own form of critical accumulation, building on arguments and insights that allow the work of Cassavetes to appear from different angles and through different doorways.

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Notes to Contributors

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1. Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: the Imaginary Signifier*, trans. Celia Britton. Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (London: Macmillan, 1982).
2. Ginette Vincendeau, 'Melodramatic realism: on some French women's films in the 1930s', *Screen*, vol. 30, no. 3 (1989), pp. 51–65.
3. Monika Treut, 'Female misbehaviour', in Laura Pietrapaolo and Ada Testaferri (eds), *Feminisms in the Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 106–21.

References to *films* in both notes and main text should include full title with initial capitalisation according to accepted style of the language concerned. Titles should be italicised, and in the case of non-English language films original release title should precede US and/or British release title, followed by director and release date in round brackets:

A bout de souffle/Breathless (Jean-Luc Godard, 1960)

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The Big Sleep (Howard Hawks, Warner Bros, US, 1945)

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2. Ginette Vincendeau, 'Melodramatic realism: on some French women's films in the 1930s', *Screen*, vol. 30, no. 3 (1989), pp. 51–65.
3. Monika Treut, 'Female misbehaviour', in Laura Pietrapaolo and Ada Testaferri (eds), *Feminisms in the Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 106–21.

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